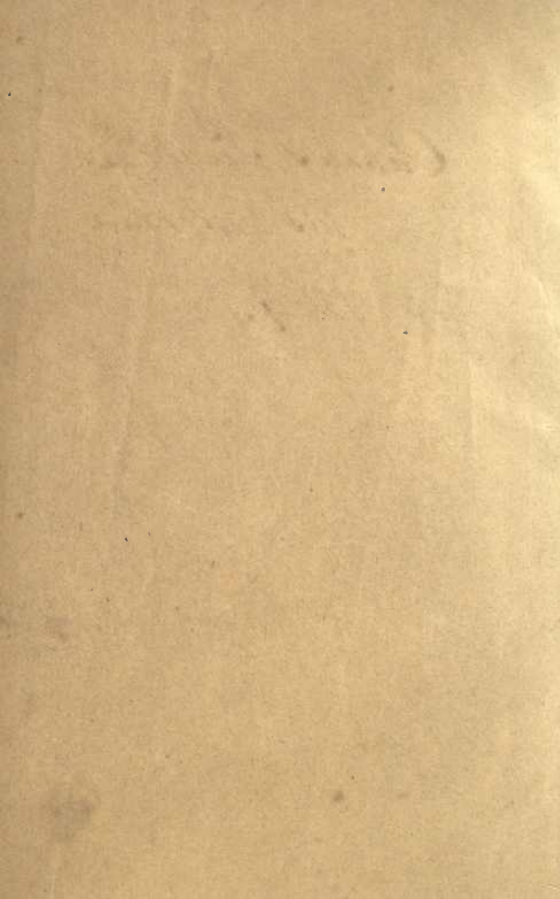




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Charles :  
from his mother  
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H.L. STEVENS.

THE WELSH.

THE LITTLE STRANGER.

THE

# Angel of the Household.

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By T. S. ARTHUR.

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PHILADELPHIA:

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## PREFACE.

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IN the "Golden Age," angels were the companions of men, holding their spirits in immediate relationship with heaven. But, as the gold of celestial innocence became dimmed by the breath of self-love—the parent of all evil—angels receded; and farther and farther they removed themselves, as men darkened their spirits with sin, until even a perception of their existence faded from the mind.

As it was in the "Golden Age" of the world, so is it in the first, or "Golden Age" of each individual life, when the innocence of infancy finds angel-companionship. Whoever holds a babe to her bosom, and holds it there lovingly, comes within the sphere of angelic influences; for, with infants and little children, angels are intimately near. This is seen in the tender love that fills the heart of even a wicked mother, when she clasps her helpless offspring in her arms—a love flowing forth from heaven, and breathed into her spirit by the angels who are with her babe.

Into every household angels may enter. They come in through the gate of infancy, and bring with them celestial influences. Are there angels in your household? If so, cherish the heavenly visitants.



THE  
ANGEL OF THE HOUSEHOLD.

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CHAPTER I.

"BEDLAM let loose!" exclaimed Mr. Harding, passionately, as he started up from the corner, near the fire, where he had been sitting moodily since supper-time. "Silence! or I'll break some of your bones!"

The children, who had been wrangling, suddenly ceased their noisy strife, and shrunk back from their angry father, who, advancing toward them, seemed half inclined to put his rough threat into execution.

"There, now! don't talk and act like a savage!" sharply ejaculated the wife and mother, throwing from her coal-black eyes a scornful glance upon her husband. "If I couldn't speak to children in a better way than that, I'd not speak at all."

We will not put on record the brutal retort of Jacob Harding, as he almost flung himself from the room; throwing over, in his mad haste, little Lotty, the youngest member of his unpromising flock, who happened to be in his way. The loud slamming of the door, and the wild screaming of the child, mingled for the excited mother's ears their sounds discordant.

"He'd better break my bones!" said the oldest boy, Andrew, in looks and attitude the picture of defiance. "I'd just like to see him try it."

"Hush this instant, you little vagabond! How dare you speak so of your father?"

"I don't care! He's not going to break my bones." And the young rebel, not over eight years of age, drew himself up, while his eyes, black as his mother's, flashed with boyish indignation.

"If you say that again, I'll box your ears off!" And Mrs. Harding took two long strides toward the lad, who, knowing something about the weight of her hand, shrunk, muttering, away, and contented himself with thinking all manner of rebellious things, and purposing all kinds of disobedience.

For a few minutes, after Lotty ceased crying, there was silence in the room; not a pleasant, but a gloomy, forced silence. Then Lucy, six years old, and Philip, between four and five, who had been frightened from their play by the scene just described, drew together once more, and commenced rebuilding a block house, which Andrew had wantonly thrown down. Their work, as it again progressed, this bad boy watched with an evil eye, and, just as it was near completion, wantonly swept again the fabric into ruins. Unable to control their indignation at this second unprovoked violation of their rights, the outraged brother and sister, as if moved by a single impulse, threw themselves upon Andrew, and with fists, nails, and teeth, sought to do him all the injury in their power. Fierce was the struggle, and long would it have continued, but for the mother's interference. She did not stop to separate them, but, with her open hand, dealt each such rapid and vigorous blows about the head and ears, that they were soon glad to retreat, crying with pain, into opposite parts of the room.

"Now, off to bed with you this instant!" exclaimed

the angry mother, "and if I hear a word between you, I'll come up with a switch and cut you half to pieces."

Andrew, Lucy, and Philip glided from the room, keeping silent through fear, for they understood their mother's present mood well enough to know that it would be dangerous to provoke her further.

"Come! let me undress you," said Mrs. Harding to Lotty. There was nothing gentle, nothing of motherly love in the tones of her voice. The waters of her spirit were agitated by a storm, and the sky above them was dark.

"I don't want to go to bed," answered the child, fretfully.

"Come here this instant, I say!" cried the mother, with threatening look and tone.

"I don't want to go to bed," repeated Lotty.

"D'ye hear? Come this minute!"

But the child, instead of obeying her mother, shrunk away into the farthest corner of the room.

"If I have to come to you, miss, you'll be sorry; now, mind!"

Most children would have been frightened at the dark, threatening eyes that almost flashed with cruelty; but Lotty was self-willed, and strong to endure, though but a child. She inherited a large portion of her mother's peculiar spirit. Instead of yielding to this threat, she crouched down in the corner, and cast back at her mother a look of defiance. Mrs. Harding was in no mood for a long parley. There were times when the mother in her was strong; and then, for the sake of her wayward, self-willed child, she would patiently strive with her, and use all gentler efforts to bend her to obedience. But now the mother had given place to the passionate woman. It was one of her hours of darkness, when all the evil of her perverse nature had sway. A few moments she fixed her eyes upon those of Lotty, throwing into them, as she

did so, a fiercer light ; but this failing to intimidate the stubborn child, all patience gave way, and she darted toward her with something like a tiger's spring. Seizing the still resisting little one, Mrs. Harding jerked her from the corner into which she had retreated, and as she lifted her up into the air, struck her three or four hard blows in quick succession.

Did Lotty lie still now in her arms, or stand passively by her side? Not so. The spirit of rebellion was like a young giant in her heart, and blows only quickened this spirit into more vigorous life. The child screamed and struggled, and even struck her mother in the face. Such resistance to her will only made Mrs. Harding blindly resolute. More smarting and longer continued blows were returned, and to these was added such a mad shaking of the child, as she held her out with both hands in the air, that Lotty, losing her breath, became frightened, and ceased her struggles.

"I'll break that stubborn spirit of yours, if I kill you!" said the mother, with cruel triumph in her tones, as she set Lotty down upon the floor heavily. With impatient hands the garments were almost torn from the little one's body, and replaced by her night-gown. Then, without an evening prayer, a kiss, or a kind good-night, she was placed in bed ; her only benediction an almost savage threat of consequences ; should a single word pass her lips.

All was silent now in the house. The older children had fallen quickly to sleep, and Lotty, subdued by the power of fear, restrained the rebel cries that were almost bursting her heart for utterance. She, too, soon passed into the world of dreams. Was it a beautiful world to her, poor child? or did haunting images, terrible in shape, follow her there from the real world in which she daily struggled and suffered?

Alone, with not a sound on the air but an occasional

sob from Lotty, the tumult of whose feelings even sleep had not entirely subdued, Mrs. Harding's state of mind underwent a gradual transition. There are few in whose spirit subsiding anger does not leave its debris of sad emotions, or painful self-condemnation. It had ever been so in the case of Mrs. Harding, yet had she not seemed to grow wiser by suffering. With every new cause of excitement, her quick temper fired up and burned its little hour fiercely; and, ever as the fire died out, her spirit felt colder than before, and groped sadly in a deeper darkness. And it was so again. How rebukingly upon this state came, now in a single deep sigh, and now in fluttering sobs, the grief of her self-willed child, prolonged even into slumber. So painful was this sound at length, that Mrs. Harding went softly and closed the door that opened into the room where Lotty was sleeping. But, through the shut door, came, ever and anon, the sigh or sob, each time smiting her ear sadly, and adding to the gloomy depression from which she was now suffering. Nor was this the only cause of self-upbraiding. She was alone, and why? Sharp, insulting words, striking on the ears of her impatient husband, had driven him, as the same cause had before, times without number, from home, to spend his evenings at the tavern, among scenes and associates of a degrading character. Ah! how often and often had the unhappy wife, as she sat through the lonely evening hours, wept far the absence of him whom her blind passion had driven forth—even from the hearth her presence might have made warm and attractive.

Alas! that suffering taught not this ill-governed woman its lessons of wisdom. That remembered anguish did not act as a stimulus to self-control. Ever as a leaf in the wind was she, when the gust of passion arose. As it had been with her many, many times, so was it now. She was too unhappy for any thing but tears; and so,



letting the work she had taken up fall into her lap, she drew her hands over her face, and sat idle, weeping, and miserable. A knock on the door disturbed her wretched mood. It was night, and their house stood at some distance from the nearest neighbour. Mrs. Harding was no timid woman; yet this summons startled her, not because it was bold and imperative; on the contrary, it was low and hesitating.

"Who's there?"

She had risen up quickly, and now stood in a hearkening attitude.

No voice replied, but the same singular knock was repeated.

"Who's there, I say?"

Sharp though her tones were, a slight tremor betrayed a secret fear.

No answer.

"Come in."

A hand was on the door knob. It seemed like the hand of a child, and failed in the apparent effort to gain admittance. Mrs. Harding distinctly heard the rustle of a woman's garments. She tried to repeat the words "Come in;" but a strange fear prevented utterance. Almost as fixed as a statue, she stood gazing at the door, which, after a little while, swung quietly open. Her eyes caught a momentary glimpse of a white garment, and then she looked vainly into the deep darkness. There was no form visible.

"Who's there?" she cried, after a brief pause; but silence was the only answer.

As she still gazed through the open door, her eyes, penetrating farther into the gloomy vail of night, saw dimly an object on the ground. Advancing across the room a few steps, she was able to perceive distinctly that this object was a large basket, covered with a cloth.

"Who's there? What's wanted?"



Again she sought an answer; but no response came. Boldly now she stepped to the door, and bending her body out, peered farther into the darkness; but there was no movement nor sound that indicated the presence of friend or stranger. Close by the door-step stood the basket. She stretched forth a hand, and made an effort to raise it from the ground; but to do this required the exercise of considerable strength.

"This is strange! What can it mean?" said she to herself, again searching with her eyes into the surrounding darkness.

"Jacob! Jacob!"

A thought that her husband might have brought the basket, flitting across her mind, prompted her to call his name.

But no answer came back upon the quiet air, that bore her voice afar off, until it died in the distance. Why does she start so? A low smothered cry, like that of an infant, has come suddenly upon her ear; from whence, she is in no doubt, for already she has lifted the basket, and is bearing it into the house.

How wildly excited was the countenance of Mrs. Harding, as she stooped down, and with unsteady hand removed the white napkin that covered the basket. The sight revealed would have touched a harder heart than hers. A babe, only a few weeks old, lifted to hers a pair of the softest blue eyes that ever reflected the light; and as it did so, fluttered its little hands, and showed all the instinctive eagerness of an infant to be clasped to a mother's bosom.

Now, with all the hardness and passionate self-will of the woman, up into whose face this helpless, innocent stranger looked, there was a warm chamber in her heart, over the door of which was written "mother;" and the hand of an angel opened this door to admit the babe so cruelly abandoned. Her first impulse was obeyed—that

prompted her to lift the child quickly from the basket, and fold it in her arms. A sweet, confiding smile played softly around its lips; and its large, beautiful eyes rested in hers with an expression so full of loving confidence, that she felt her whole bosom warming with love, and yearning toward it with inexpressible tenderness. The kiss that could not be withheld from the rosy lips that parted to receive the salutation, was the kiss of a mother.

Ere there was time for reflection or observation, the babe had won its way into the heart of Mrs. Harding. The door still remained open as she had left it in the excitement incident to bearing in the basket. Mrs. Harding, now aware of this, arose, still holding the child in her arms, and crossed the room to shut the door. Was it really so; or did her imagination create the picture? Be this as it may, just in the dusky extreme of the circle of light made by the rays pouring out from her lamp, she saw the form of a woman. The face was distinct, and its expression never to be forgotten. It was a young face, very sad, very full, and very beautiful. The hands were clasped tightly together, and the figure seemed bending forward eagerly. For a moment or two the vision was distinct; then it faded slowly, and the eyes of Mrs. Harding saw nothing but darkness.

Closing the door, with a strange feeling about her heart, she went back to where the basket stood upon the floor, and, seating herself beside it, the babe on her lap, commenced an examination into its contents, with the hope of gaining some light on the mysterious circumstance. But nothing here gave her the least clue to the parentage of the child, or made clear the reasons for committing it to her tender mercies. In the basket were four or five full changes of clothes, most of them made of good, but not very fine material, except the white flannel skirts, which were soft as down, and of the choicest quality. These were not so new as the other

articles. No letter was to be found in the basket; nor did it contain any money.

While Mrs. Harding was thus seeking for all possible light in regard to the babe, it had fallen asleep in her arms, unconscious that any great change had taken place in its fortunes or friends, and as happy in its slumbers as when it nestled on its mother's bosom—if, indeed, it had ever known that blessed privilege. Perceiving this, and affected with a new tenderness as she gazed down upon its face—one of uncommon sweetness, even for a babe—she sat for many minutes with her eyes upon its countenance. Her gaze seemed held there as if by a kind of fascination. What a yearning love grew up in her heart, gaining strength every moment! She wondered at her own feelings.

Rising now, and holding the child with exceeding care, she passed into the next room—her own chamber, where Lotty was sleeping—and gently laid the sweet young stranger in her bed. Here she lingered for some time, leaning over and looking upon the child. Once or twice she left the bed, and went as far as the door, purposing to leave the chamber. But a strange attraction drew her to the babe again and again, and each time it seemed that its face had acquired a newer beauty.

At last, Mrs. Harding compelled herself to leave the apartment; and as she did so, she closed the door softly. Sitting down by the basket, she commenced a new examination of its contents. This was as fruitless of intelligence as the first. Not a mark nor sign was there, to tell from whence the infant came.

Half an hour elapsed, and still Mrs. Harding sat musing over the basket, her mind incapable of finding, for the present, interest in any thing but what appertained to the babe.

Thus she was sitting, when the heavy tread of her husband startled her into painful consciousness of coming

trouble. Jacob had never been very fond of children—not even of his own, toward whom he had shown but little tenderness. That he would manifest only ill-nature, perhaps give way to violent passions as soon as he learned that a strange infant had been left at his door, she had too good reason to fear.

He came in roughly, as was his wont—shutting the door heavily behind him.

“Hush!”

Mrs. Harding raised her hand involuntarily, to enjoin silence. But her rude husband strode noisily across the floor, heedless of her warning.

“What’s that?” he said, as his eyes rested on the strange-looking basket.

“You would hardly guess,” answered Mrs. Harding, speaking with a forced pleasantness of tone, very unusual with her when addressing her husband.

“I shall hardly try,” said he, gruffly.

“A strange thing has happened to-night.”

The voice of Mrs. Harding was not as steady as she wished it to be.

“How, strange? What has happened? Who’s been here?”

“That basket was left at our door to-night.”

“By whom?”

“I cannot tell.”

“With somebody’s cast-off brat in it, I suppose,” said Harding, with a flush of anger in his face, for now he saw the baby clothing which his wife had taken from the basket and laid on the table. “Is it so?”

The flush had deepened to a fiery glow, and his eyes burned with indignation.

“The basket contained a young babe,” said Mrs. Harding calmly, and with a mother’s tenderness in her voice; “the sweetest, loveliest babe your eyes ever rested upon.”

"Pshaw!" And Harding averted his face, on which was a look of supreme contempt. "I'd like to know," he added, menacingly, "who has dared do this thing!"

"That we are not likely soon to know," said Mrs. Harding. "The basket contained only infant clothing."

An almost savage imprecation leaped from the tongue of Jacob Harding. For a little while he stormed about the room like a madman. Under almost any other circumstances, his conduct would have kindled up in the mind of his wife as fierce a flame as that which burned in his own. But a woman's true instincts subdued her passionate nature, usually so quick to gather all its forces for combat. Silently she waited for the fire to burn out in her husband's mind for want of fresh fuel, that she well knew how to supply.

"It is such a sweet baby," said Mrs. Harding, in as calm a voice as she could assume, after her husband's fierce indignation had in a measure consumed itself.

"Humph! sweet!" How the selfish, cruel animal growled! What a look of disgust was on his countenance—scarcely human in its expression!

Harding had come home from the tavern, ripe for a quarrel; and he was doing all in his power—impotent of effect so far—to raise a storm. He had not been drinking much: only enough to deaden all of true manhood that he possessed, and to quicken into active force the evil of his nature. He now perceived the change in his wife, and at once divined the cause. The foundling had won its way into her heart, and she was already purposing to adopt it as her own. The thought enraged him anew.

"Where is the brat?" he exclaimed, starting up with a fresh burst of anger. "I'll throw it out of doors!"

"Better replace it in the basket, poor thing!" answered Mrs. Harding. "It has done us no harm."

"Very well. Put the duds back into the basket, and

the child with them. They shan't stay in my house to-night!"

Conscious that, if she gained over her husband at all, it must be through apparent yielding, rather than resistance to his will, Mrs. Harding commenced slowly replacing the baby clothes, as if about to do his bidding. A little wondering at this passive acquiescence on the part of his wife, Harding stood looking on while she laid in garment after garment.

"It is dark out, Jacob, and will be cold before morning. And then the dogs, or some other animal, might hurt the poor helpless thing."

"I don't care. It shan't stay in my house to-night. I'll teach people better than to leave their brats at my door—I will!"

The man's stubborn spirit was roused by the remonstrance of his wife.

A deep sigh heaved the breast of Mrs. Harding, as she bent once more over the basket, and, to gain time, made some new arrangement of the baby clothes.

"Don't be all night about it!" growled the savage.

Mrs. Harding, without a word in reply—a circumstance that excited the especial wonder of her husband—took up the basket, and passed into their chamber, as if to do his bidding. Acquiescence like this he had been far from anticipating. Yet was he, in the blindness of evil passion, bent on thrusting the babe from his house. The very thought of it was an offence to him.

"Jacob!" It was the voice of his wife, calling to him from the adjoining room, where she had been for several minutes.

"What do you want?" he answered, gruffly.

"Come here a moment," Mrs. Harding spoke, in a mild, subdued voice.

"You come here. You're as able to walk as I am," he retorted.

"Just a minute. I want to show you something."

Harding arose and went into the room from which his wife had called to him. In the middle of the floor stood the basket, and lying in the basket, with its beautiful face uncovered, was the sleeping infant.

"There it is, Jacob," said Mrs. Harding, in a low, steady voice. "Cast it forth, if you have the heart to do so—I have not."

How suddenly were the man's steps arrested! The moment his eyes fell upon the placid face of the infant, so innocent, so peaceful, so heavenly in expression, he felt himself within the circle of some strange power that stilled the waves of passion in his heart.

"Cast it forth, Jacob, if you can," repeated his wife. "My hands would be powerless were I to make the effort."

A little while Harding struggled with himself and the new influences that so suddenly pervaded the atmosphere around him; then, with an effort, he turned himself away, and went back into the room from whence his wife had called him.

Tenderly, very tenderly, did Mrs. Harding lift the sweet babe, still sleeping, from the basket, and replace it in the bed, the moment her husband retired, vanquished by weapons his fierce manhood despised, yet against which he had no shield of defence. For some time she bent over the baby, gazing upon its face; and it was only with an effort that she could tear herself away.

"You'd better keep it all night," said Harding, as his wife entered the room where he was sitting. His voice, though untouched by gentler feelings, was not so harsh and cruel as before. "Some harm might come to it, and then we'd be blamed. To-morrow I'll have it sent to the poor-house, if no owner can be found."

Mrs. Harding sighed, but said nothing in reply. She

was afraid to express what was in her mind, for, by years of sad experience, she knew that for her to express a wish, or to approve a measure, was to insure her husband's opposition; and, in truth, it must be told, that she had proved no inapt scholar in the same bad school where he had learned his lessons of ill-nature and bootless contention.

"I only wish I could find out who has dared to do this miserable deed," resumed Harding, his anger growing warm again. "A wild beast never deserts her young. The wretch should be gibbeted alive."

As he said this, a cry arose from the chamber.

"There it is! A nice time you'll have with it to-night."

Mrs. Harding went quickly in to the babe, that was now awake. She lifted it gently in her arms, and, as she drew it to her breast, it commenced nestling there, seeking for the fountain of its life—alas! so suddenly and so cruelly cut off. How deeply was the heart of its new friend stirred by this movement! What a yearning pity pervaded her bosom!

"Dear, dear child!" she murmured, as she bent down her face, and placed that of the infant's closely against it. Holding it thus, she went out into the room where her husband still remained.

"Won't you get me a little milk in a cup, and some sugar and warm water, Jacob? The poor child is hungry."

Harding, with considerable reluctance, went off, grumbling, to do as his wife desired. The milk and warm water were brought, and, as he set them on the table, he could not restrain the utterance of an ill-natured remark. To this no answer was returned.

Much to the relief and pleasure of Mrs. Harding, the babe drank freely from the spoon which was placed to its lips. Evidently, it had been prepared for this great



change in its life by those who contemplated abandoning it to strangers. Somehow, Harding's eyes remained riveted on the face of the child, as it took the food prepared by his wife; and, strangely enough, the longer he gazed upon it, the gentler became his feelings. The human in him began to rise above the bestial.

"No punishment is bad enough for the wretch who could desert a child like that," said he, his ready indignation taking a new direction. "It was fiend-like."

"You may well say that, Jacob," returned his wife, as she drew the babe's head back upon her bosom, and looked down tenderly upon its face. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"I never saw any thing very beautiful in babies," said the man, a little impatiently. He was worried with himself because of the involuntary interest in the little stranger that was awakening in his mind.

"Oh! how can you say so?"

Something of the sweetness of bygone years was in the voice of Mrs. Harding, and something of the maiden beauty in her face that had won the heart of her husband in the long-ago time; at least so it seemed to Jacob Harding.

"It is true, Mary," he answered, even smiling briefly, as he spoke.

"There is beauty here—beauty that even your eyes can see. Dear little angel! It has come to us like a ray of sunshine, Jacob. You don't know what strange feelings I have had ever since I looked into this sweet countenance. More like a heaven-born than an earthly child the babe seems to me; and now, as it lies so close against my bosom, I feel such a pleasant thrill going deep, deep, even to the centre of my heart, that I wonder as to the cause."

"You are foolish, Mary," said Harding, kindly.

"Maybe I am," she replied, "but I can't help it.

Now it is fast asleep again ! Did you ever see such perfect lashes for a babe ? They lie in a dark line upon its cheeks like the long lashes of a woman. Let me place it in bed again."

Mrs. Harding arose and turned to go into the bedroom. As she did so, her foot caught in the carpet, and she would have fallen forward had not her husband, whose eyes were on her, or, rather, on the babe, sprung instantly forward and caught her.

"Don't let it fall," he cried, eagerly, stretching his arms around and beyond her, so as to save the child. The act was involuntary ; but it betrayed, both to his wife and himself, the strong hold that weak, helpless, unconscious infant had already gained upon his rugged heart. How this betrayal caused the warm blood to leap joyfully through the veins of Mrs. Harding ! When she returned from the bed-room, and addressed her husband, he answered in milder tones than he had spoken to her in many days—weeks and months we might almost have ventured to affirm.

"There's something uncommon about the child, that's certain," he said, as they talked together ; "and I shall not feel just right about sending it off to the poor-house. But it can't stay here, for we've enough of our own, and it's as much as I can do to fill *their* mouths."

To this Mrs. Harding answered nothing. So far, the babe had been its own all-sufficient advocate, and she felt that words from her might prejudice rather than advance its cause.

As husband and wife laid their heads upon their pillows that night, each felt a calmness of spirit hitherto unknown. Selfish passions were at rest, and higher and purer emotions—so long held down by evil—stirred with a new life, and opened the windows of their hearts for the influx of celestial influences.

## CHAPTER II.

As Mrs. Harding lay watchful and musing on her pillow that night, she wondered at her state of feeling. Could the mere presence of a babe effect so great a change? Four times had she been a mother, and four times she had felt, as a helpless babe, just born into the world, was laid against her heart, an indescribable joy. Too soon had this passed away—too soon had her briefly slumbering passions awakened to fresh activity—too soon had the trials and temptations of her position changed the heavenly tenderness that pervaded her spirit into harshness or indifference. She remembered all this, and wondered how she could ever have indulged in anger toward the little ones for whose gift her heart had felt such deep thankfulness.

How distinctly present to the eyes of her mind were Andrew, and Lucy, and Philip, and Lotty! Not with faces marred, as was, alas! too often the case, by selfish and cruel passions, but with each young countenance beautified with loving affections. With what a new impulse did her heart go out toward them! All the mother in her was stirred to its profoundest depths. While she thought and felt thus toward her own children, involuntarily she raised her head, and bending over, lay, partly reclining, with her eyes fixed upon the calm face of the sweet, young stranger.

"Baby—dear baby!" She could not keep back the low utterance; and, as she spoke, she lifted the sleeper in her arms, and, hugging it to her bosom, commenced rocking her body, and murmuring a tender lullaby.

"Don't be foolish, Mary!" Jacob Harding spoke

more roughly than he felt, but in tones less reproving than he had meant to use. "You'll waken the child, and then we shall have a time of it."

"She is so sweet," said Mrs. Harding, as she kissed the babe, and then replaced it in the warm nest from which it had just been withdrawn. She did not know that her husband was awake: he had been lying so very still, that she believed him sleeping. But busy thought, excited by a new current of feeling, had driven slumber also from his eyelids.

"One would think you'd never seen a baby before!"

There was no ill-nature in the voice of Jacob Harding, notwithstanding he tried to speak unkindly. The fact was, he had been so long in the habit of speaking harshly to his wife, that, to address her with any thing like tenderness, seemed an unmanly weakness. And so he put on a rough exterior to hide the softness within. He could not entirely hide it, however. Mrs. Harding perceived all the change he, too, was experiencing, and it but increased her wonder and delight. She did not venture a reply, lest something in her words should quicken the perverse temper of her husband.

Never in her life before did Mrs. Harding fall asleep in such a state of mind, or with thoughts so full of all tenderness and loving-kindness; and never before came to her a dream so strange and beautiful. Last in her thoughts, as all waking perceptions died, were the singular incidents of the evening; and, as fancy began to mingle her airy forms with the things of actual life, the strange vision—real or ideal—that fixed the eyes of Mrs. Harding, as she gazed through the open door into the surrounding darkness, was most prominent. Across this warp, fancy threw her shuttle, and strange figures were soon made visible in the dreamy fabric she wove.

Again Mrs. Harding was alone in the family sitting-room. No babe was in her lap; but, in the open door

stood a beautiful woman, and she knew her to be the same whose white, sad, yearning face had been revealed to her a moment on the background of shadows. Tender and serious, but not sad, was her face now, as she beckoned with her hand. Mrs. Harding arose and followed the lovely apparition. As she stepped beyond the threshold, she became aware that the earth lay in sunlight, and that the scenery around was new and more beautiful than any thing she had seen. Here were soft, green meadows, dotted with snow-white lambs; there, leafy avenues, along which the eye ranged to an almost interminable distance, and yonder towered up, even to the spotless heavens, mountains as blue as the sky itself.

"The land of innocence and essential love," said the stranger, as they gained an eminence and looked down upon the scene spread out in beauty before them. "The angels of childhood dwell here. Whenever a babe is born upon the earth, two angels from this world are appointed to its guardianship, and they remain near the child through all the days of its tender infancy; and near the mother, also, filling her heart with love for her helpless offspring. It is their presence that so often changes the selfish and cruel woman into the tenderest of mothers. They flow into her mind through love for her babe, and fill it so full of what is gentle and good, that evil passion has no room for activity. But, gradually, as the minds of infants are opened, through the senses, to a knowledge of the world into which they have been born, and as the will, gaining strength, is moved by inherent evil, the angels gradually recede from both the child and the mother; not because they wish to abandon their charge, but because their gentle influence is no longer perceived. With some they remain longer than with others; for some children are born with fewer perverse inclinations, and some mothers love their babes with a divine rather than an earthly love."

As the fair stranger ceased speaking, Mrs. Harding perceived that they were standing in one of the porticos of a building, the architecture of which, in its grandeur, exceeded any thing ever reached by the boldest imagination. The walls were of translucent gems, and everywhere the ornaments, that seemed living forms, gleamed with gold and sparkled with precious stones of wonderful brilliancy. Into this magnificent palace they entered, and the stranger led the way to a large east room, where a small company of beautiful virgins stood near a window, from which they were gazing earnestly.

"Let us approach them," said the stranger; and they moved over to where the virgins were assembled by the window.

"Pride and human fear have hardened her heart." Thus spoke one of the virgins. "And she is about to desert the babe. See!"

All bent near and gazed from the window. To the eyes of Mrs. Harding every thing looked dark and sad. It was some time before she was able to distinguish objects; but, when her vision was clear, she recognised all the prominent features of the scene. Dimly revealed from out of the murky shadows, was the neighbourhood where she dwelt, and she seemed to be looking down upon it, as from an eminence. It was night, for all was in half obscurity, and the stars were shining from the sky. Here and there stood a house—she knew them all—and there was her humble abode, the only one from the window of which light streamed forth, upon the gloomy darkness. As she continued to look, an object moving along one of the roads became visible. Gazing more intently, she saw a woman, and in her hand she carried a basket. A thrill passed along every nerve, as she recognised the face that had looked so wildly upon her from the fading circle of light, and she turned

quickly toward the stranger who had led her thither—but she was now alone with the virgins.

“Not there,” said one of the company.

The woman had paused before a house, the inmates of which Mrs. Harding knew to be best esteemed in all the neighbourhood for goodness of heart and kindness of action. In this home there was ease and comfort; and the babe, if left there, would find love and tenderness.

“Why not there?” she asked aloud.

“Even a babe has its mission of good to the world,” answered one. “A household angel will this babe be, wherever it is received; for to the best of Heaven’s angels has been committed its guardianship. If the mother, hearkening to evil counsel, casts it from her, the blessing of its presence must be for those who need the blessing. No, not there.”

And the woman, who had paused before the dwelling of peace, took up the bundle, and passed on slowly, wearily, and in tears.

“Not there,” said one of the virgins, as she stopped before another dwelling.

The woman seemed to hear the words, for she raised the basket again, and kept on her way. As she did so, her eyes received the light, streaming forth from the Hardings’ window, and she turned her step thitherward.

“The angels of childhood are about to leave that dwelling,” said one of the virgins; “for innocence has almost died in the hearts of the children. A dark shadow is resting over them, for the powers of evil have prevailed over the good. Let the babe go there.”

“There? Not there!” answered one of the virgins. “The innocent, helpless lamb must not be left in a den of wild beasts.”

“It will not go alone,” was replied. “Angels have gathered their protecting arms around it; and its own sphere of innocence will be a wall of defence.”



A low cry reached the ears of Mrs. Harding—the cry of a babe. Instantly the vision faded, and she became aware that a small, soft hand was nestling in her bosom. There was a love, more than human, in her heart, as she gathered the half-waking infant in her arms, and felt that she had been, and still was, in the company of angels.

How vivid remained the impression of her dream—not to her a mere phantasm, but a real vision!

“For this great blessing, Father, I am thankful,” said she, as she lifted upward her heart to heaven.

Strange fact! Not, perhaps, since the days of innocent childhood until now, had she felt that God was near to her, and near as the Giver of good; and that she should address God in a thankful spirit! She wondered, even while she gave involuntary thanks.

When Mrs. Harding slept again, it was to dream of the babe, and to have a consciousness of deep peace, such as she had never experienced in her waking moments. New purposes and better states of mind had been formed during both the waking and sleeping hours that passed since the little stranger first greeted her with its winning smiles. The morning found her calm, thoughtful, yet sad. What a trial was before her! Ah! how clearly she saw her difficult position! How sunk her heart, as one hard, harsh fact after another, of that position, looked her sternly in the face! She had as much to fear from within as from without—from her ungovernable passions as from the tempers of her husband and children.

Dimly the morning broke, the cold light creeping slowly into the chamber where she lay. Her husband and Lotty still slept; but the babe was awake, and its large blue eyes were looking up into hers. How sweetly it smiled! How trustful and loving the whole expression of its young face!



"Blessed baby!" she said tenderly.

And it responded to her greeting with a curving lip, and the low, cooing sound of a dove, as she talked to it, forgetful of every thing in the pleasure of the moment. Harding awoke suddenly, and starting up in bed, muttered some incoherent words, and threw his eyes hastily around the room. His voice chilled the heart of his wife, for she dreaded his waking mood. Scarcely thinking of what she did, Mrs. Harding drew the bed-clothes over the child, and so placed her body as to shield it from his observation.

"I've been dreaming, I believe," said Harding, as he laid himself back on the pillow.

"Dreaming of what?"

Mrs. Harding spoke very gently. In half wonder, her husband turned his head to look into her face—the tone was so unusual.

"I never saw any thing so real."

"Was it a pleasant dream?"

Harding looked over at his wife again. It was the old voice that, in times gone by, had sounded to him so musically.

"Yes, Mary," he answered, mildly, "it was a pleasant, though a singular dream. I thought some one left a baby at our door"——

He paused abruptly, looked serious for a moment or two, and then said—

"But *that* was no dream, Mary."

He now raised himself up, and, as he did so, Mrs. Harding drew down the bed-clothes, and showed him the smiling infant.

"It was no dream, Jacob," she said, kindly.

For some time, Harding gazed upon the little face, and the longer he gazed, the softer grew his heart. He said no more of the dream; yet, as well to him as to his wife, had come a vision—though not in all things alike.

He had seen the little abandoned one in sleep, and under circumstances that impressed his mind powerfully.

It was now broad daylight, and Lotty, as was usual with her, awoke in a bad humour. She commenced crying even before her eyes were fairly open.

"What do you want, Lotty?" asked Mrs. Harding.

But Lotty cried on, not seeming to have heard her mother's voice.

"Lotty! Lotty!"

The crying did not cease for an instant.

"See what I've got here, Lotty!"

"You ain't got any thing!"

By such words the child had been so often deceived, that no confidence remained even in her mother. And so she kept crying on.

"Will you hush, now?"

The father's patience was gone, and he spoke in a quick, angry voice. How the little stranger babe started! What a frightened look was in its face! Harding saw the effect of his harsh tones; and, for the sake of the babe, regretted the sudden passion to which he had given way.

"But I *have* got something here, Lotty," said Mrs. Harding. "It is the dearest little baby you ever saw in your life."

Instantly the voice was silent, and, springing from the bed in which she lay, Lotty stood beside her mother. Harding watched her face, and saw how suddenly it changed.

"It is wonderful!" he said to himself, as he arose and commenced dressing—"wonderful. It seems even now as if I must be dreaming. 'A heaven-sent child.' These were the very words that sounded in my ears as I awoke; and I verily believe the babe is from heaven."

"Baby! baby! dear, sweet baby! O mother! where did it come from?"

There was such a gush of delight in the voice of Lotty, who was usually cross in the morning, as she stood on a chair, and bent over the infant, that Mr. Harding's wonder increased. A spell about the babe subdued all who came near. To him it was a new life-phenomenon, the mystery of which filled him with surprise, not unmingled with a heart-pervading sense of pleasure.

Mrs. Harding now arose, leaving Lotty and the infant equally delighted with each other, and commenced hurriedly dressing herself. It was her business to prepare the morning meal; for the earnings of her husband were not sufficient to allow her help in the family. With many earnest injunctions to Lotty not to hurt the babe, she left the chamber for the kitchen, in order to make up the fire and get breakfast. Somehow or other, the fire kindled with unwonted quickness; and every touch and movement of her hand seemed to accomplish her purpose more readily than usual. By the time the milkman was at the door, she had the table set, and the kettle was almost ready to boil. The babe's breakfast was her next thought. It was scarcely the work of a moment to dilute some new milk with warm water, to add a little sugar, and a few crumbs of bread, and to bear it into the chamber where she had left the little stranger.

As she came in noiselessly, she saw her husband stooping over the infant, whose two white, chubby hands were fluttering about his rough face, and heard the cooing, dove-like voice that had sounded once before to her so sweetly.

As soon as Harding perceived that his wife was present, he left the bedside, half ashamed of his weakness in thus toying with a mere babe.

"The child must be hungry," he said, with as much indifference as he could affect.

"I've brought her something to eat," answered Mrs. Harding. "And won't you, Jacob, while I feed her, call the children, and bring me in an armful or two of wood? Breakfast will be all ready in a little while."

There was no resisting the manner of Mrs. Harding. If she had always spoken to her husband as now, he would always have been to her a kind husband. Her power over him for good might have been complete, had she been wise, gentle, and forbearing. But she had exercised no self-control, and almost from the beginning of their married life, had excited the evil in him, rather than the good. How much she had lost, and how much she had suffered in consequence, can hardly be imagined. Her life, for the last six or seven years, might almost be called a living martyrdom.

Harding did not answer, but went out from the chamber promptly to do as his wife had requested. Ordinarily, in calling the children, he spoke, to use the strong words of his wife, "as if he would take their heads off." He corrected this bad habit in the present instance; for, instead of ordering them roughly and angrily to get right up, or he would be after them "with a stick," he ascended to the room where they lay, and spoke kindly, yet firmly, to each one, subduing their waking impatience, by the quiet pressure of his own voice and manner.

"Andrew," he said in a tone that, exciting no opposition in the boy's mind, left the consciousness that he must obey—"dress yourself before you come down, and do it quickly."

"Yes, sir," was answered cheerfully, and Andrew sprang from his bed.

"Philip! Lucy!" The two younger children rose up. "Go down to your mother. She wants to dress you."

The voice and manner of their father were so unusual,

that the little ones felt both surprise and pleasure. They obeyed instantly, and Mr. Harding had the strange satisfaction of witnessing an act of ready and cheerful obedience in his children.

A great surprise awaited Lucy and Philip, and they were just in the state of mind for its full enjoyment.

A stranger, who had looked in upon Harding's family at the early meal on the previous day, and who looked in again upon them as they assembled around the breakfast-table on this morning, could hardly have believed that his eyes rested on the same individuals. In her usual place was Mrs. Harding, the stranger babe on her arm, and looking so beautiful and happy, that all eyes and hearts were drawn toward it. Little Lotty, from the moment its bright eyes looked into hers, had not once left its side, and now, as she sat close to her mother, she could not eat for pleasure.

"Has it any name, mother?" asked Andrew, from whom had not proceeded a single ill-natured word or act, since he came down and saw the baby.

Mrs. Harding did not reply, but looked at her husband. A name had been floating in her thoughts, but she hesitated about giving it utterance.

"Dora," said Mr. Harding. "Let us call her Dora."

Now, that was not the name about which Mrs. Harding had been thinking; nor was it a name that pleased her ear. It was on her tongue to say, "Oh, no;" but she kept silent. Her eyes were bent down upon the little one's face, and there she read her duty. For its sake, she refrained from objecting, because she feared that any want of accord with her husband would produce a state of opposition; and so she said nothing.

"Shall it be Dora?" Harding spoke in a pleasant voice.

"Yes, if you like the name." And Mrs. Harding looked up and smiled as she answered.

"Have you thought of one, Mary?"

"A name has been in my mind ever since I awoke this morning. But if Dora sounds pleasant to your ears, let her be called Dora."

"What name did you think of? Perhaps I will like it best," said Harding.

"Grace." Mrs. Harding spoke the word softly and tenderly.

"The very name!" said her husband. "It is much better than Dora. Let her be called Grace."

"Grace! Grace!" All the children echoed the name; and the baby, as if conscious of a new importance, tossed its little hands, and smiled.

So touched was Mrs. Harding by this unexpected acquiescence of her husband, that tears came into her eyes. For the first time in months, it might be years, Harding had deferred to her wishes—but not in consequence of resolute persistence on her part. Had she contended for the name that pleased her best, he would never have seen in it a beauty and fitness above the one he preferred himself; and she would, in the end, have been compelled to yield, or have the babe thrust out from the home into which its presence had already brought so many rays of sunshine.

And so the babe was named Grace.

"What will you do, Mary?" said Harding to his wife, as, after sitting longer than usual at the table, he arose to leave the house. As he spoke, he looked toward the child that still lay in her arms. Mrs. Harding understood, and answered quickly—

"Oh, I shall get on very well. Breakfast wasn't late a minute this morning, and I'm sure every thing has gone on pleasantly. No hurry nor confusion. The children never behaved better in their lives."

And the mother glanced at them approvingly.

"But you can't attend to an infant, and do all your work into the bargain?"

"You see if every thing isn't in order, and dinner smoking on the table when you come home," answered Mrs. Harding, cheerfully, and with smiles.

Harding lingered. There was a fascination about little Grace, from the circle of which it seemed as if he could not break.

"What are we to do with this child, Mary?" said he, his manner becoming serious. "We have more children now than we can well take care of."

"Has it brought us trouble or pleasure, so far?" asked Mrs. Harding, looking up earnestly into her husband's face. He did not answer.

"Would you like to see it taken to the poor-house?"

"No, no. It shall not go there!" Harding spoke quickly and strongly.

"It is a heaven-sent child, Jacob," said Mrs. Harding, in a low but impressive voice. "I know it from the dream that came to me last night. Let us accept the boon thankfully. He who sent it to us will see that it shall prove not a burden, but a blessing."

Harding answered not a word, but drew nearer to his wife, and, bending down, laid his finger upon the babe's soft cheek. He would have stooped lower and kissed the cheek, but felt ashamed to betray what seemed to him a weakness.

When that hard, harsh, passionate man went forth into the world of strife and labour, he carried in his thoughts the beautiful image of a babe. Men with whom he had been used to come in rough contact, saw a change, but divined not the cause. He was less coarse in speech, and rude in action—less contentious—less overbearing. The consequence was, that men who had always treated him roughly, because he was himself rough, instantly changed their manner, so that fewer



things than usual occurred to chafe his spirit. Not during all that morning was the image of the babe once wholly obliterated, though many times obscured.

"What does it all mean?" said Harding to himself, as he reflected on the change. "Am I the same man that I was yesterday? What is there in a little helpless babe to cast a spell like this?"

But he questioned in vain. He could not understand the mystery. With lighter steps and a lighter heart than usual, he took his way home at dinner-time, looking for sunshine there. And he did not look in vain, for it lay broader and brighter over his threshold than it had lain for many years.



## CHAPTER III.

THERE was quite a stir in the neighbourhood when the news got abroad that an infant had been found at the door of the Hardings. The gossips had a "world to say" on the subject; and all agreed, that a more unfortunate selection of a home for the little one could not have been made.

"It don't matter much as far as that goes," said Mrs. Margaret Willits, the storekeeper's wife, as she chattered over the tea-table with Mrs. Jarvis and Miss Gimp; "for the truth is—all among ourselves, remember—Harding can't support his own children, let alone other people's. Somebody will have to take the child off their hands, or they'll send it to the poor-house."

"But he does support his own children," replied Miss Gimp.

This was ingeniously remarked, in order to draw Mrs. Willits out.

"I'm not so sure of that," said the storekeeper's wife, mysteriously.

"Who does support them?"

Mrs. Jarvis put the question direct.

"I guess we do our part—this among ourselves."

"Oh, I understand," said Miss Gimp, a light breaking over her countenance. "He doesn't pay up at your store?"

"You've hit it right—but it's all among ourselves, remember."

"Oh, of course," returned Miss Gimp. And——"

"Of course," said Mrs. Jarvis. "We wouldn't speak of it on any consideration."

"Don't, if you please; for they're bad kind of people, and I wouldn't get their ill-will on any account. Mrs. Harding has an awful tongue in her head; and what is worse, I verily believe she would seek to do me some harm, if she knew I'd said a word against her."

"Don't be afraid," said both of the ladies at once.

"And so Harding owes your husband?" Miss Gimp spoke insinuatingly.

"Oh, yes. He's been getting things off and on now, for a year. Every little while he comes and pays something on account; but manages to let his bill keep getting larger and larger. Mr. Willits says it must stop soon. He was going to refuse them trust last week; but thought he would wait a while longer. He knows that the moment he stops them off, Harding will be terribly angry, and that he will not only lose the custom of the family, but all the money that is owed to him into the bargain."

"Rather a hard case," remarked Miss Gimp.

"Isn't it? And so, as I was saying, it doesn't matter much for the child, that it was left at their door. They'll never dream of keeping it."

"When was the infant abandoned?" asked Mrs. Jarvis.

"Three nights ago," replied the storekeeper's wife.

"Indeed! I never heard a syllable of it until to-day. And the child is still with them?"

"For all I know to the contrary," said Mrs. Willits.

"They've been very quiet about the matter, that's certain," remarked Miss Gimp, who was dressmaker and assistant gossip for the neighbourhood. "Three nights ago—and not a breath of it to reach my ears until last evening! It looks mysterious. Why should they be so very still about it?—they, of all people in the world! I shouldn't wonder, now that I think of it, if they knew more about the matter than they care to

tell. There's something wrong, depend on't. I'm as sure of it as that I am sitting here."

"Wrong in what way?" asked Mrs. Jarvis, manifesting a new interest in the subject.

Miss Gimp affected a mysterious manner, as if she knew more of what was going on in the neighbourhood than she felt at liberty to tell.

"Have you any suspicion as to where the child came from?" inquired Mrs. Willits.

"I have my own thoughts," said Miss Gimp, with a gravity that so well became her. "But thoughts cannot always be spoken."

"We are all friends, you know, Miss Gimp." Mrs. Jarvis put on her most insinuating manner. "Old friends, who can trust one another."

"I'd trust you with any thing I knew certain," replied Miss Gimp. "But it's all guess-work here. Wait a few days. I'm bound to sift this matter to the bottom. At present, I'll just give it as my opinion, that the Hardings know a great deal more about the child than they care to tell."

"You may be right there, Miss Gimp," said Mrs. Willits—"else, why have they kept so still about it?"

"Exactly! Why have they kept so still about it?"

"Did you hear," inquired Mrs. Jarvis, "whether there was a letter in the basket with the child?"

Mrs. Willits shook her head.

"Of course, there must have been," said Miss Gimp. "There always is, in affairs of this kind. Take my word for it, the parentage of that child is no secret to the Hardings. And"—her imagination was taking a freer range—"I shouldn't at all wonder if the basket contained something more than a baby."

"What?"

The two ladies bent closer toward Miss Gimp.

"Money!"

“Money?”

“Yes: a handsome sum of money; and a letter besides, promising a regular payment of more every month or quarter, as long as they keep the child. Depend upon it, this is the case; I’m as sure of it as if I had seen into the basket myself.”

“You’ve guessed it as certain as fate,” said Mrs. Willits, with animation. “No one would have trusted a little helpless infant in their hands, without some strong hold, like this, upon their selfishness. Well, all I can say is, that, in the first place, they didn’t deserve any such good fortune; and in the second place, whoever selected them as guardians of the child, have made a cruel experiment.”

In this the other ladies fully agreed, Miss Gimp remarking, “It is an ill wind that blows nobody good. Your husband, Mrs. Willits, may now stand some chance of getting his money.”

“Sure enough! I didn’t think of that. It takes you, Miss Gimp, to see all the bearings of a subject.”

Miss Gimp was flattered by this compliment, and drew her head up in a way peculiar to herself when pleased.

“Has any one seen the child?” inquired Mrs. Jarvis.

“I have not,” answered Mrs. Willits; “nor have I met with any one who has called on Mrs. Harding since it was left at her house. There’s neither pleasure nor comfort in visiting her; and so people stay away. I haven’t been in her house for three months. The fact is, the last time I called on her, she was in an awful humour about something or other, and as snappish as a turtle. I’m sure she boxed the ears of every child she has, three times over, while I was there, and, if the truth must be told, they richly deserved all they got; for a more ill-mannered, quarrelsome brood I never saw. Andrew, their oldest boy, is a perfect little desperado.

The way he knocked the other children about was dreadful. I was in fear every moment of seeing some of their limbs broken or eyes put out."

"Just as it was when I called there last," said Miss Gimp. "I went to fit a dress for Mrs. Harding. The house seemed like a perfect bedlam. The children quarrelled all the while, and their mother stormed at them incessantly. I was too glad to get away."

"Do you expect to go there again very soon?" asked Mrs. Jarvis.

"I ought to have gone there a week ago, to take home the cape of her last new dress. She wants it, I know. There isn't more than half an hour's work on it, and I'll do that this very evening."

"Then you'll see her in the morning," said the storekeeper's wife.

"Yes."

"Just drop in on your way back, Miss Gimp; that's a good soul. It's such a strange affair, I really feel curious about it. Take a good look at the baby, and see if you can trace a likeness to anybody. And then, be sure to find out if any money came with it, or is promised. I want to know about that, of all things."

"Never fear for me," said Miss Gimp, looking unusually bright. "I'll gather up every crumb of information."

"And you'll call in as you go by?"

"Oh, certainly."

"Do, if you please," said Mrs. Jarvis; "for, as I have an errand out in the morning, I'll manage to be here—at what time?"

"Say ten o'clock," replied Miss Gimp.

Little else was talked of by the ladies during the hour they remained together after tea.

On the next morning, at ten o'clock, Mrs. Willits and Mrs. Jarvis sat together, awaiting the arrival of Miss

Gimp, who had looked in upon the storekeeper's wife, as she passed on her way to the Hardings, to say that she would call on her return and make a report. Sooner than they expected the dressmaker, she came in. Her face did not look very animated.

"Good morning, Miss Gimp!—good morning!" said the ladies.

"Good morning."

Miss Gimp tried to look important and well satisfied with herself, but the effort was wholly unsuccessful.

"Well, Miss Gimp, did you see the baby?"

"I did."

There was an ominous gravity in the gossip's tones.

"Is it a nice-looking baby?" inquired Mrs. Willits.

"A very nice-looking baby, indeed. In fact, it's the dearest, sweetest little thing I ever saw."

"Why, Miss Gimp! You don't say so?"

"It's the truth, every word I tell you."

"Well, really! It's a nice baby, then?"

"You may believe it. And then, it's so good! Mrs. Harding says it hasn't cried an hour since it came into the house."

"You don't tell me!"

"I can well believe her; for, while I was there, it did nothing but smile and coo, and try its best to talk to every one who came near the cradle where it lay."

This information was not half so satisfactory to the two ladies, as the report of its being cross and disagreeable would have been.

"Well, so much for the baby," said Mrs. Jarvis.

"And now, Miss Gimp, tell us all you learned about it. Where do you think it came from?"

"Haven't the least idea in the world," replied Miss Gimp.

"Really!"

"Really!"

"Could you trace a likeness?"

Miss Gimp shook her head.

"Doesn't it look like somebody you have seen?"

"No one that I can remember; and yet the face is strangely familiar. It seems as if I had met it only yesterday; but, for my life, I cannot tell where."

"What does Mrs. Harding say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Or next to nothing. She's very quiet and very reserved. Something has come over her and the whole family."

"Indeed!" Both the ladies spoke at once.

"In what respect?" asked Mrs. Willits.

"I didn't hear a cross word while I was in the house, either from mother or children. The last time I was there, Lotty, the youngest, did nothing but fret, and snarl, and cry. But this morning she sat on the floor, beside the cradle, looking fondly on the baby, or playing with it in the gentlest manner. The fact is, that baby seems to have brought a charm into the house. I could hardly believe I was with the same people."

"You don't tell us so?"

"It's the truth, just what I say."

"Was there any letter or money in the basket?" inquired Mrs. Willits, whose interest in that aspect of the case was particularly strong.

"Not that I could find out," answered Miss Gimp. "I felt my way, and hinted, and did every thing except put the question direct; but Mary Harding either could not or would not understand me. She was always a little close-mouthed, you knew."

"Why didn't you ask her right up and down? I would have done so," said Mrs. Willits.

"It was on my tongue's end more than once; but every time I was about to speak, she seemed to know



what was in my mind, and made some remark that threw me off."

"How provoking!"

"It was provoking," said Miss Gimp, looking particularly annoyed.

"What does she intend doing with the little stranger?" asked Mrs. Jarvis.

"Keep it," replied Miss Gimp.

"She's got a house full of her own now—more than her husband is able to support," said Mrs. Willits. "I don't understand the woman."

"I think I do," returned Miss Gimp, assuming a knowing look. She was good at surmising. "As to there being any disinterested feeling toward the babe, that is not admitted for an instant."

"Of course not."

Miss Gimp resumed—"You may rely upon it, then, as I suggested in the beginning, that she knows all about where the child came from, and is well paid for taking care of it."

"But how do you account for the singular change in her temper, and, above all, for the change in the temper of her children?"

"I've thought of all that," answered the dressmaker, "and own that I am puzzled. It has occurred to me, that her young savages may have been tamed, as they tame wild beasts, by hunger and stripes. If she has a motive strong enough to make her resolute, Mrs. Harding is not the woman to hesitate about the adoption of any means for the accomplishment of her purposes. It has, no doubt, been made her interest to keep this child, and to keep it right. If this is really so, she will make all bend to her will in the matter."

And so, after all, the dressmaker had failed to learn any thing about the babe, that was satisfactory either to herself or her friends, Mrs. Willits and Mrs. Jarvis. As



might be supposed, the report of Miss Gimp excited still more the curiosity of the two ladies, who had urged the visit to Mrs. Harding. They were really troubled, because of their inability to penetrate the mystery that surrounded the affair. Over one bit of information, reserved to the last by Miss Gimp, they became excited; but it left them still in the dark.

"Harry Wilkins saw the person who left the basket at Harding's door," said the dressmaker.

"What!"

"I was talking with Harry Wilkins last evening, and he says, that on the night the child was left at Harding's, he went to Beechwood. On the way, he met a woman carrying a basket. She was young, and had something strange-looking about her. It struck him that she was in trouble, for she seemed very irresolute—walking on for a time hurriedly; then stopping as if in doubt; and once or twice turning back toward Beechwood. His curiosity was excited, and he watched her for some time. On his return, he met her again, but without the basket. He passed very close to her—close enough to get a glimpse of her face, which he says looked like the face of one in deep distress."

"And she came from Beechwood?" said Mrs. Jarvis, breathing deeply.

"She came from that direction, Harry says."

"The child's mother, no doubt. What a wretch she must be! From Beechwood? That's something to know. I've got a cousin living in Beechwood, and I'll go over and see her this very blessed week. I shouldn't wonder if she could trace the whole affair."

Saying this, Mrs. Jarvis arose, and made a movement to go, at which Miss Gimp remarked that she must run home also, as she had promised a dress on that very day, and the scissors were not into it yet. Nearly five minutes elapsed before all their parting words were said;

then they separated, with mutual promises to sift the matter more closely, and to communicate, one to another, any thing new that might happen to be learned.

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## CHAPTER IV.

A WEEK passed, and, notwithstanding Mrs. Willits, in league with Miss Gimp and Mrs. Jarvis, had been all eye and all ear, so to speak, yet they had not been able to learn any thing satisfactory to themselves about the stranger babe. Each of the ladies had, during the time, made a call upon Mrs. Harding, and each came away, more strongly confirmed in her first conclusion, that she knew a great deal more about the child than she had cared to tell. As for the babe itself, there could be but one opinion. Miss Gimp said it was "lovely;" and when she spoke of an infant so decidedly, you might be sure there was something about it more than common.

Meantime, singular changes were progressing in the home where the little offcast had found an asylum—changes that as much surprised the inmates as those who looked on from a distance. Grace had won all hearts from the beginning; even selfish, rude, ill-natured Andrew, who had been the pest of the family, stood subdued and gentle in her presence. Before she came, his greatest delight was in annoying and oppressing the other children; now his chief pleasure consisted in holding the babe, carrying her about, or playing with her as she lay in the cradle. So attentive was he, that Mrs. Harding scarcely perceived any new demand upon

her time, in consequence of so important an addition to her family. Left more to themselves, by the diversion of Andrew's attention, the other children—whose almost incessant strife owed its origin mainly to their older brother's interference—rarely gave way to a wrangling spirit. When it did occur, a word from their mother subdued their angry feelings.

Often and often did the hands of Mrs. Harding pause in her work, as she thought intently on this new order of things, and wondered how it was, that a single word could calm the stormy passions of her children, when only a little while before, nothing but a more violent storm on her part could allay the tempest on theirs. How greatly she was herself changed, did not come with clearness into her apprehension—changed, we mean, in her external aspects; for, internally, no real change had yet taken place: there was only the beginning of a change. Nor was she aware how different were her words and manner of speaking, when addressing her children, to what they were a little while before.

One thing the children did not fail to notice. It was this: the marked difference in their mother when Grace was awake and in the sitting-room, and when she was asleep in the adjoining chamber. She was always gentler and more forbearing toward them when the babe was present than when absent. Nor did Mrs. Harding fail to remark, that the children were more gentle and obedient when Grace was in the room with them than when she was sleeping.

Quite as remarkable was the change in Mr. Harding. He never came in, now, with a heavy, horse-like tread, nor banged the door behind him, as had been his custom. Nor did he reprove the children, when in fault, with his former angry violence. Always he went first to look at the babe, as if that were uppermost in his thoughts. And what seemed to please him particularly,

was the fact, that little Grace began to flutter her tiny hands the moment he appeared, and never seemed better satisfied than when in his arms. Not once, since she came to them, like a gift from heaven, as she was, had he left home in the evening, to spend his time at the tavern. In his favour it may be said, that his associations at the tavern had never presented a very strong attraction; and he had only gone there, because every thing in the home-sphere, owing to the incongruities of temper between him and his wife, was disagreeable and repulsive.

We have omitted thus far to mention that Jacob Harding was a carpenter by trade. His shop stood at no great distance from the store of Willits the grocer, and not far from the tavern kept by a worthless fellow named Stark, who was doing more harm in the neighbourhood in a single month than he had ever done good in his life. The absence of Harding from the bar-room of Stark, for so many consecutive evenings, did not fail to excite the tavern-keeper's attention, who, not liking to lose so good a customer, made it his business to call in at the shop of Harding, and in a familiar, hale-fellow, well-met sort of a way, inquire if he had been sick. This was about a week after the appearance of little Grace in the carpenter's family. Harding answered in the negative, and with a slight coldness of manner.

"What's the matter, then?" said Stark. "Any thing wrong at home?"

"Nothing."

"We wanted you, particularly, last night. Tom Ellis, from Beechwood, and Jack Fleming, from Avondale, were both here. They had a jolly time of it, I can tell you; and if they asked for you once, they did a dozen times. You don't know what you lost. They're coming over again this evening. You must be sure and meet them, for I promised that you would be on hand."

"You were a little too fast in that," said Harding, as he tightened the blade in his jack-plane, and then sighted the edge to see if it was at the true cutting distance.

"Why so?" asked Stark.

"Because I shall not be there."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because I'm better off, and better contented, at home," was replied.

"Tied to your wife's apron-string."

This was said pleasantly, yet with just enough of sarcasm to touch the quick feelings of Harding, without giving offence.

"I never was tied to a woman's apron-string in my life, and never expect to be. Mary Harding knows me far too well to attempt any thing of that kind."

The tavern-keeper shrugged his shoulders, and arched his coarse eyebrows in a way that said, "I can believe as much of that as I please."

The quick temper of Harding took fire, and he was about making a sharp retort; but, singularly enough, the image of little Grace came suddenly before the eyes of his mind, and something in her innocent face subdued and tranquillized him.

"Look here, Harding." Stark spoke in a coarse, rough way. "What's this I hear about somebody's brat being left at your door? Is it so?—or only Gimp-gossip?"

"A young babe was left at my door," Harding answered, coldly, and, at the same time, commenced driving his plane over a rough board that lay on his work-bench.

"You don't tell me so! Well, what have you done with it?"

"Kept it."

"Kept it! You're joking! I thought you had a

house full of your own—more than you could get bread for without making a slave of yourself.”

Harding felt annoyed, as well at the tavern-keeper's words as his manner, and an angry retort was on his tongue. But he controlled himself, and merely answered, with assumed indifference—

“We haven't found it in the way, so far.”

“Whose is it?” inquired Stark, still in his rude manner.

“Don't know,” replied Harding.

“Why don't you send it to the poor-house? I'd do it in less than no time.”

“When we are tired of keeping it, perhaps we will do so.”

Stark began now to see that his way of speaking to the carpenter was not altogether relished; and, as it was by no means his interest to offend one of his customers, he changed, somewhat, his manner of addressing him. But he failed altogether in his effort to restore the old state of feeling that had existed between them.

From the shop of Harding, Stark went to the store of Mr. Willits, where he bought a barrel of sugar and a bag of coffee. He was about the only man in the neighbourhood whose pocket-book was sufficiently well filled to warrant the purchase of groceries in such liberal quantities.

“Make out the bill and receipt it,” said he, in a self-satisfied voice.

“I like that,” was the pleasant response of the store-keeper. “I wish all my customers were as ready to put the cash down.”

“Pay as you go—that is my motto,” returned Stark. “You'll not find my name on anybody's books.”

“It's the safest kind of a motto, and one that I shall have to suggest to two or three people about here, even

should I offend them," said Willits. "Harding, for instance, between you and me."

"Jacob Harding! Why, is he running behind-hand?"

The storekeeper, before answering, threw open his ledger, and, after glancing rapidly along a column of figures on one of the pages, said—

"Yes; to the tune of a hundred dollars in six months."

"Whew! And he's the man that takes in stray babies? He can afford to be generous—at your expense."

"Not any longer. Thank you for that hint. I'll act upon it at once."

And so he did; for, at that moment, Andrew Harding entered the store, with a wooden pail in his hand, and said that his mother had sent him for six pounds of flour and two pounds of sugar.

"Have you brought the money?" asked Willits.

"No, sir. Mother says, charge it."

"Tell your mother that I can't charge any thing more."

The boy looked bewildered. He did not clearly understand the storekeeper.

"Tell your mother that she must send the money. I can't trust any more."

Andrew retired slowly, his mind in considerable perplexity, and bore the message to his mother.

"That's right," said Stark, approvingly. "It's the only safe way to do business. I rather think Harding will be as mad as a March hare. You may look out for a squall before night."

"Let it come; I'm not at all concerned," replied Willits.

"I hope," said Stark, growing serious, "that nothing I have said has caused you to take this stand with



Harding. "We've always been on good terms; and I wouldn't say any thing to injure him for the world."

"Oh, no. My mind was pretty well made up before you came in. That baby business decided me. Mrs. Willits and I were talking it over last night, and we both came to the conclusion that, if he couldn't make both ends meet before, there was no hope for him now. We did think, at first, that a money inducement caused him to keep the child; but Mrs. Harding assured my wife, yesterday, that not a farthing came with it, nor was promised at any future time. If they are fools enough to take up a burden like this, they mustn't expect me to bear it for them."

"This refusal on your part may do them good," said Stark. "It will, at least, open their eyes to their true position. I rather think the child will find its way into the poor-house before it is a week older."

"I don't care where it goes, or what becomes of it," answered the storekeeper, "so I get my money."

Soon after Stark left the shop of Jacob Harding, the latter put on his coat and hat, and went over to the house of a farmer, named Lee, about a quarter of a mile distant. This Lee, a rather thriftless sort of a man, who spent far too large a portion of his time and money at Stark's tavern, owed the carpenter a hundred and fifty dollars for new roofing his house, and doing sundry repairs to his dilapidated old barn. The account had been standing for some months. On the payment of this money, Harding had intended settling his bill at the grocer's. The manner of Willits, on the day before, when he had called to get half a pound of tea and some corn meal, annoyed him considerably. He saw that the storekeeper was getting uneasy at the size of his account, which, but for the failure to procure a settlement with Lee, would have been long since paid off. He had brooded over this until a sort of desperate feeling took



possession of him; and, in this state of mind, he went over to see the farmer.

"Can't do any thing for you," said Lee, in the coolest way imaginable, on Harding's asking for a settlement. "Haven't ten dollars in cash to bless myself with, let alone a hundred and fifty."

Harding felt exceedingly fretted at this way of treating him, and said, quite sharply—

"Pray, Mr. Lee, when do you intend settling my account?"

"Some of these days," replied the farmer, indifferently.

"That way of doing business don't suit me. I want something definite. I paid the cash down for the shingles that cover your roof; and now I want my money."

"Don't get excited, Harding: it won't do any good," said Lee. "The man doesn't live about here that can drive this horse; so *you* needn't try."

This was more than the carpenter could bear. Bitterly did he retort upon the farmer, and left him, finally, with threats of an immediate resort to law for the recovery of his bill.

When Harding and his wife met at dinner-time, each perceived in the other's countenance a troubled aspect. Harding's heavy brows were drawn down; and about his wife's mouth was the old look of fretfulness that had so often repelled him. For the first time, he passed the cradle without even looking at Grace, whose round, white arms had commenced flying the moment she heard the sound of his footsteps across the threshold; and, going into the yard, he took up the axe, and commenced splitting up a stick of cord wood. This done, he came back into the house, again passing the cradle, and sitting down, in moody silence, at the dinner-table, on which their meal had already been served. While

cutting up the meat, and helping it around, the low, sweet, coaxing murmur of the baby's voice sounded in his ears. The cradle was only a little way from him, and so turned that Grace could see him. And there she lay, fluttering her arms, and cooing, and trying all means in her power to arrest his attention. Yet, resolutely, he kept his eyes turned away from the imploring little one. But weaker, each moment, became his resolution; for her voice came to his ears like the music of David's harp to Saul, driving out the evil spirit. At last he could resist the babe's pleadings no longer. Almost stealthily, he turned his eyes upon her. One look was enough. The tenderness of a mother filled his heart. So sudden was the revulsion of his feelings, that, for a few moments, he was bewildered. But of one thing he was soon clearly conscious, and that was of having Grace in his arms, and hugging her almost passionately to his heart.

## CHAPTER V.

THE suddenness with which Harding arose from the table and caught up the child, which he had not seemed to notice since he came in, and the eager way in which he held it to his heart, naturally excited the surprise of his wife, who looked at him wonderingly. His indifference toward Grace had not been unobserved by Mrs. Harding. She saw that he was in one of his unhappy moods—that a dark cloud was on his spirit—and that only a word was needed to awaken a fierce storm. And, more than all this, the message brought from the store-keeper by Andrew had so deeply angered her, that her mind was still panting under the excitement, and still fretting itself with indignant thoughts; so that she, too, was ready for strife. It had been as much as she could do to keep back from her lips words of sharp reproof, for the cruel indifference manifested by her husband toward the pleading babe: most probably, a few minutes longer of forced neglect on his part, would have brought down upon him a storm of words that would have marred every thing for little Grace, and made her presence, in the household, ever after, a cause of angry contention. Happily, the quick-tempered wife controlled her struggling impulses long enough for better influences to prevail. As she looked at the singular exhibition of feeling in her husband, she was touched by softer emotions. The incident gave her a deeper insight into his character, while it quickened her own thoughts into self-reproaches for the misjudgment which had wellnigh fanned a few embers into fiercely burning flames of discord.

As for Harding, now that the repressed tenderness of his heart had free course, he found himself carried away as by a flood. The babe in his arms felt more precious to him than life itself; and it seemed as if he could never be done hugging it to his heart. When, at length, he reseated himself at the dinner-table, with Grace on his knee, and looked over to his wife, the cloud had passed from her countenance.

"What possessed you," she said, smiling, and in a pleasant voice, "to neglect the sweet child so? She was almost dying to have you notice her."

Harding did not answer, but merely drew Grace close against him, and, bending over, talked to her in fond, childish language.

A calm followed this little exciting episode, in which both Mr. and Mrs. Harding looked and felt sober, but not ill-natured. After dinner, as Harding was preparing to leave the house, he took some silver change from his pocket, and handing it to his wife, said—

"Our bill at the store is getting rather large. Don't send for any thing without the money. Here are two dollars and a half for any little thing you may want."

The change in his wife's countenance as he said this arrested Harding's attention.

"What's the matter?" he asked, abruptly.

"Nothing much," she replied, her face flushing as she spoke. "Only I'm glad you've left me some money, for we're out of flour, and—and"——

"And what?" She paused, stammering, and Harding saw that something was wrong.

"Nothing, only Willits sent word this morning, that he wouldn't let us have any thing more, unless we paid the money down!"

"He did!" A fierce light burned instantly in the eye of Jacob Harding, and his lips were drawn back against his teeth.

"Yes," said his wife, forcing herself to speak in a mild and soothing way; "but no matter, Jacob. Let us try to get on without asking for credit anywhere. I'll do my best to economize in every thing. It chafes me to be under obligations to anybody, and especially to the Willits. I don't like any of the family."

"That's talking outright, Mary!" said Harding, the threatening scowl on his heavy brow suddenly breaking away; and, as he spoke, he thrust his hand a second time into his trousers pocket, and drew out a handful of small change, which he counted over.

"Here are three dollars more," he added. "It's all the money I have just now, and may be all I shall receive this week. Make it go as far as you can."

"You may be sure I will do that, Jacob," replied his wife, kindly and earnestly.

"Wouldn't trust us any more!" Harding's mind returned to this hard, unpleasant, mortifying fact. "Very well—so let it be. He's had a good deal of my money in his time—I hardly think he will get as much in the future. Don't you buy any thing there that you can do without. The next time I go over to Beechwood, I will lay in a good stock of things, if I happen to have the money. I saw Lee to-day, and tried to get him to settle that bill of his; but he put me off again, and is more indifferent about it than ever. I got out of all patience, and threatened to put the sheriff on him. It will have to come to this sooner or later; and the quicker it is done, the quicker I shall get my money."

"Couldn't you trade off the account to Willits, and thus save a world of trouble?" suggested the wife.

Mr. Harding caught at this suggestion, and, after turning it over in his mind for a few moments, said—

"I don't know, Mary, but that might be done. Now that I come to think of it, I remember hearing somebody say that Willits was about buying that house and

acre lot where Jones lives. You know it belongs to Mr. Lee. There's no doubt in the world but that he could settle my account in the transaction. I'll see him about it this very afternoon."

"Do, Jacob," answered his wife, encouragingly. "It will be such a relief to have this all off our minds."

In spite of his indignation against Willits, Harding went direct to his store. The latter, on seeing him enter, made up his mind for a sharp passage of words with the fiery tempered carpenter. Still, he managed to receive him with a forced smile.

"How much have you against me on your books?" inquired Harding, speaking firmly, and with a sober countenance, yet repressing, as far as possible, all appearance of anger.

The storekeeper, affecting a pleasant manner, turned over his ledger, and, glancing at the account, which was already footed up, replied—

"One hundred and fourteen dollars."

"So much as that?" Harding showed surprise.

"I will make you out a bill of items, day and date, and you can examine the account. I presume you will find every charge correct."

"I expected to have paid this long ago," said the carpenter, "but have been disappointed in getting a large bill. To-day I tried my best to collect, but I'm afraid there's no chance for me, unless I go to law, and I don't want to do that."

"Whose account is it?" inquired Willits.

"The one I have against Lee for roofing his house, and repairing his barn."

"Is it possible he hasn't paid that yet?"

"Not a cent of it."

The storekeeper looked serious for a few moments, then, shaking his head, he remarked—

"That's not right in Lee."

"No, it is not right," said Harding, warmly. "If he had paid me, I would not now be in debt a single dollar."

"Have you any objection to transferring your account to me?" Willits hesitated a little, as if fearful the proposition would not be received with favour. "I have some business transactions with Lee, in which, most probably, I could manage to include your bill."

"The very thing I thought of proposing to you," said Harding. "I understand you are about buying the property now occupied by Jones; and it has occurred to me that you might save my account in the purchase, thus obliging me and getting a settlement of your own bill at the same time."

"It can all be done, no doubt," replied the store-keeper. "Lee has offered the house and grounds at a fair price, and is anxious for me to buy—so anxious, that a proposition to take your claim against him in part payment will be no impediment to the bargain. The best way for you to proceed will be to get his note in settlement. He'll give that readily enough, in order to gain time, and get rid of the annoyance of being dunned. This note you can endorse to me, and I will pay it over to him."

Perfectly satisfactory to both parties was the proposed arrangement, and the two men separated in much better humour with themselves and each other than when they met. During the afternoon, Harding called again on Mr. Lee, who readily acceded to his request, and gave him his note, at six months, in settlement of the account.

"Pleasant news, Mary," said the carpenter, as he came home at sundown. "My name is off of Willits' books."

"Off of his books! How, Jacob?" Mrs. Harding did not see his meaning clearly.

"I've settled his account."

"Have you? Oh! I'm so glad."

"And better still, Mary: he owes me thirty-six dollars, which I have agreed to take out of his store, as we want things in his line."

"It is pleasant news, indeed, Jacob. But how did all this come to pass?"

"Just in the way you suggested. Willits has taken my bill against Lee, and credited me with the difference between that and the account on his books."

"Oh! I am so glad: it has taken such a load off of me," said Mrs. Harding. "I don't believe Mr. Lee would ever have paid the bill without your suing him; and I dread lawsuits above every thing: they always bring trouble to both sides."

Already, Grace was in the great, strong arms of the carpenter; and Lotty, between whom and her father a new and gentler relation had existed ever since the stranger-babe came to them, was leaning on his knee and playing with the happy little one.

At this moment, a form darkened the door. It was the form of a woman, just past life's middle age. Her countenance was strongly marked—the lines as indicative of patient endurance as great suffering. She was tall in person, with the carriage of one who had moved in polished circles.

"Can you tell me," said she, as she advanced one foot inside of the door, "how far it is to Beechwood?"

"Nearly two miles, ma'am," replied Mrs. Harding, who had turned, on perceiving the presence of a stranger.

"So far away?" said the woman, in apparent concern. "I can't possibly reach there before dark."

"You certainly cannot," replied Mrs. Harding. She then added, "Won't you come in and rest yourself?"



"Thank you," returned the stranger, stepping across the threshold, and advancing a few paces into the room.

"What a dear, sweet babe!" she said, as, on taking a chair, she fixed her eyes, with a tender, admiring gaze, upon the babe that still remained in Harding's arms. She could not have offered a remark better calculated to make a favourable impression on the minds of the carpenter and his wife.

"What is her name?" she asked, after a moment's pause.

"We call her Grace," replied Mrs. Harding, all her countenance lit up with pleasure.

"Grace—Grace," said the woman, half speaking to herself, in an abstracted way. "A beautiful name," she added; "none more beautiful." And then she bent forward, and gazed at the child with such an earnest, tender expression, that Mrs. Harding, who was observing her intently, felt a troubled consciousness that she knew something of the child, and did not now look upon it for the first time in her life.

There was about the stranger a bearing that inspired involuntary respect. Her calm, intelligent eyes looked into those of the carpenter and his wife in a way that caused them to feel a singular deference; and when she referred again to the long distance she had still to go, and spoke, in a troubled voice, of the gathering darkness, Harding said, looking at his wife—

"If the lady will accept what poor accommodations our house will afford, she need not go to Beechwood to-night. What say you, Mary?"

"She is welcome to the best we have to give," was the answer of Mrs. Harding.

"I did not expect this," said the woman, evidently touched by the proffered hospitality; "nor do I know whether it will be altogether right for me to trespass on

your kindness. If there is a respectable tavern in the neighbourhood"——

Harding shook his head, as he answered——

"There is no tavern about here but Stark's, and I couldn't advise you to go there. If you will remain in our poor home, believe yourself entirely welcome."

"Let me take your bonnet and shawl," said Mrs. Harding, encouragingly; and she reached out her hands to receive them.

The woman hesitated only a moment, and then removing her bonnet and shawl, gave them to her hostess, who took them into the adjoining chamber. As Mrs. Harding returned to the apartment she had just left, she was struck with the singular beauty of the woman's countenance—bearing though it did the marks of time—as well as by the depth and brilliancy of her eyes, that were fixed, almost as if by fascination, on the infant which still lay against the bosom of her husband.

All parties were now, for a time, in a state of embarrassment. Harding felt a little uncomfortable in the presence of the woman, whose eyes, whenever they rested upon him, seemed as if trying to read his very thoughts; and the stranger, conscious of the effect her entrance had produced, did not feel altogether at ease.

"Let me have that dear babe," said the woman, reaching out her hands toward Grace.

The little one shrunk closer against the breast of Harding, while a shade, almost of fear, darkened her face.

"Won't you come?"

The woman spoke in soft and winning tones, and still extended her hands; but the babe could not be lured from its place.

At this moment, Andrew came in, rudely, dashing his hat upon the floor, and pushing his sister Lucy aside so roughly as almost to throw her down. Lucy gave an

angry scream at this violence, and called her brother some vile name. The woman turned, half startled, at this sudden outbreak, and fixed her dark, penetrating eyes on Andrew, who, now first conscious of the presence of a stranger, became quiet, and shrunk away into the farther part of the room, the eyes of the woman still following him.

"Is that the place for your hat, sir?"

Anger, as well as mortification, caused Harding to speak roughly to the boy. The woman seemed quite as much startled by the voice of the father as she had been by the rudeness of the son. The look she threw upon him was timid—almost fearful; and her eyes passed rapidly from his dark, threatening face, to the calm, sweet, confiding countenance of the infant, who seemed not in the least disturbed by the sudden gust of passion which had come sweeping over the little household.

Andrew looked sulky and stubborn for a few moments only; then he returned to the place where his hat lay upon the floor, and taking it up, hung it upon a nail. In the next minute he stood beside the baby, who, the instant she saw him, arose from her reclining position, reached out her little hands to him, and almost springing into his arms, gave voice to her pleasure and affection in sounds as well understood as if the utterance had been in words. Andrew bore her in a sort of triumph about the room; while the stern features of his father gradually relaxed, as his eyes followed the happy babe, until no trace remained therein of the anger which disfigured it a little while before. Lucy, too, forgot her indignation against Andrew, and, moving close beside her brother, clapped her hand at Grace, and talked to her with a voice so full of tenderness, that the stranger looked at her in wonder, hardly crediting the fact that she was the same little girl who, scarcely a moment before, had startled her with a shrill cry of anger.

Silent, yet attentively observant of all that passed, did the visiter now remain, until supper was ready, and she was invited to join the family in their evening meal.

"Do you reside in Beechwood?" inquired Harding, addressing the stranger, soon after they had gathered around the table.

"No, sir," was her simple answer, somewhat coolly made, as though she wished to repel inquiry.

"You have friends there?" said Harding, who, as he observed the stranger more narrowly, felt his curiosity in regard to her increasing. Particularly did her manner of looking at the child excite his attention: to him it seemed as if she made an effort to conceal the interest really felt by her in the little one.

"Yes, I have friends there," she replied; and then said, almost in the same breath, "How old is your little Grace?"

Harding looked at his wife, and she looked at him. Both seemed taken by surprise at the question; and both were slightly confused.

"How old is it, Mary?" asked Harding.

"About nine weeks," replied Mrs. Harding, her face receiving a shade of colour as she spoke.

The stranger looked at her intently. Mrs. Harding's eyes fell under the steady gaze.

"A bright child for nine weeks old," remarked the woman.

Then she seemed to lose herself in thought, and once or twice sighed deeply. After the supper-table was cleared away, and the children were all in bed, her manner underwent a change. She was now entirely at her ease, and conversed in so attractive a way with the carpenter and his wife, that both found themselves strangely drawn toward her, and ready to answer freely in regard to their personal affairs, about which she inquired with

an interest they felt to be genuine. About people in the neighbourhood she also asked questions; and when reference was made to Stark the tavern-keeper, she spoke strongly of the danger of visiting such houses as he kept.

"It gratified me more than I can express," she said, looking at Harding, "to find you at home, during the evening, with your family. There is every thing to hope, for a sober, industrious man. Your struggle with the world may be hard for a time, but keep a brave heart. With temperance, industry, and frugality at home, you are sure to rise above your present position. It is our first meeting, and it may be our last; but if we ever do meet again, I shall expect to find that Andrew Harding has taken a long stride in the way of prosperity."

There was more in her manner than in her words that impressed the mind of the carpenter. But no matter in which lay the influence, Harding felt new purposes growing up in his heart; and he even said to himself, "If ever we do meet again, it shall be as you predict."

At an early hour, Mr. and Mrs. Harding retired, after having shown their guest to the little spare room kept for visitors.

"I must have one look at that dear babe of yours," she said, as she was about leaving them for the night.

Mrs. Harding led her into her own chamber, where Grace was sleeping, and drew down the bed-clothes from the face of the infant. The woman bent low over it, and, for a time that seemed long to Mrs. Harding, stood gazing upon the calm face before her, so full of heavenly innocence. There were tears on her lashes, when, with a deep, quivering sigh, she lifted herself from the babe. Placing a hand on the shoulder of Mrs. Harding, and

raising a finger slowly upward, she said, in a tone so solemn, that it thrilled to the heart of her auditor—

“God has committed to your care one of the precious ones whose angels are ever before his face. Oh! never forget your high responsibility. Love, cherish, keep the dear one.”

The woman's voice faltered. She made an attempt to say more; but, as if conscious that she was betraying too much feeling, turned away quickly, and retired to the little chamber that had been assigned to her.

On the next morning, breakfast was all ready, ere the stranger joined the family.

“Had you not better call her?” said Harding to his wife.

Mrs. Harding stepped to the door of the guest-chamber, and tapped lightly. She tapped a second time, for there was neither movement nor reply; yet all remained silent. A louder summons was answered only by its own echo.

Wondering at this, Mrs. Harding lifted the latch, and pushed open the door.

“There is no one here, Andrew,” she said, in a startled voice.

“No one, Mary!”

“Even the bed is not tumbled! What can it mean?”

The carpenter now stood beside his wife, and both entered the room together. There was no evidence whatever that any one had passed the night there. On the little dressing-table was a narrow slip of white paper, which Mrs. Harding caught up. On it was written simply these words—

“Grace Harding. Ten weeks old to-day. June 4th, 18—.”

“It is very strange!” said the carpenter, with a look of doubt and wonder on his countenance.

"Very strange!" echoed his wife, in a troubled voice.

"Who can she be?"

"One," answered Mrs. Harding, "who knows all about our little Grace. I felt that it was so last night."

And weak, pale, and trembling, she sunk into a chair.

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## CHAPTER VI.

THE sudden appearance of the woman, her singular conduct, and mysterious departure, were new facts in the strange series of events, that were almost bewildering the minds of Mr. and Mrs. Harding. Something in this woman's manner had strongly impressed them both, and now, when they thought of her, it was with a certain sense of constraint, as if she were present, and closely observing their actions. That she bore some kind of relationship to the babe was no longer a question in their thoughts; and it was equally clear, that her visit was by no means accidental or purposeless.

A pressure upon the feelings was a natural consequence; not so much a troubled pressure, as a certain thoughtful sobriety, favourable to self-control, and productive of wiser counsels in the minds of both the carpenter and his quick-tempered wife. Each had need of a preparation like this, for the day was to prove one of more than ordinary trial.

From some cause, Andrew, their oldest boy, naturally of an exceedingly perverse temper, was ill-natured and



quarrelsome beyond his wont, on this particular morning. Since rising, he had not ceased to interfere with Lucy and Philip, and this created a strife among the three, which the mother vainly sought to subdue. Not until the father, with a stern threat and a smart blow, commanded the overbearing lad to cease from his annoyance of his brother and sister, was the discord abated. And then the evil in the boy's heart remained strong as ever. Only the fear of instant punishment kept down the spirit of rebellion.

Soon after his father left for the shop, his mother said to him—

“Andrew, go over to the store, and get me two pounds of sugar and two pounds of rice; and go quickly, for it's nearly school-time now.”

“Where's the money?” Andrew spoke very rudely.

“Never mind the money,” said Mrs. Harding. “Go and do as I tell you.”

“'Taint no use. Mr. Willits said yesterday that you needn't send for trust any more.”

“Go, this minute, you little”——

The angry mother caught the profane epithet just leaping from her tongue, and kept it back from utterance.

“'Taint no use, I tell you,” persisted Andrew. “He said”——

“Off with you, this instant!”

And Mrs. Harding, unable to restrain her indignation, made two or three rapid strides toward the boy, who, seeing from her face that he was in danger, darted from the house, and went away toward the store. After being gone long enough to have done the errand twice, he came loitering back, without the articles for which he had been sent.

“Where's the sugar and rice?” asked his mother, looking at him sternly, as he came in.

"I told you so," was his irritating reply.

"Told me what?" said Mrs. Harding.

"Why, that you needn't send there for trust any more."

"Have you been to Mr. Willits'?" asked his mother, growing suddenly calm, and speaking very firmly.

"Yes, ma'am, I have," was the unhesitating answer.

"And you saw Mr. Willits'?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And asked him for the sugar and rice?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What did he say?"

"He wanted to know where my money was; and when I said I had none, he told me to go home and tell you that he didn't charge things any more."

All this was spoken by Andrew with a steady voice and eye, and in a manner that but ill concealed a spirit of triumph.

For a little while, a tempest of indignant anger raged in the breast of Mrs. Harding.

"He'll be sorry for that, or I am not a living woman!" she muttered to herself, as soon as a little self-possession was obtained, and thought ran partially clear once more. "Here's the money," she added, aloud, speaking to Andrew, as she drew from her pocket some change; "go back, as swift as your legs will carry you, and get two pounds of rice and two pounds of sugar."

The boy took the money, and went loitering indifferently away; but, ere he had gone ten paces, a switch was laid smartly over his shoulders by his mother, who could no longer control her anger against him. The effect was all she wished to produce. He sprang from her like a frightened young deer, and ran the whole distance to the store. In returning, he resumed the old

pace, and managed to get back at least half an hour after school-time.

"It's so late, mother, can't I stay at home to-day?" This was his response to a hurried order to start off immediately for school. "Mr. Long will keep me in."

"I don't care if he does. It will serve you right. No; you can't stay home."

The lad threw himself down on the door-step, and began to cry.

Poor Mrs. Harding! Notwithstanding the influence of recent events, the causes of irritation were too many and too strong for her. Almost since daylight had this perverse boy been making assaults upon her patience. Several times she had lost the self-control she was struggling to maintain, and given way to bursts of passion, and as often had she striven to force back into quietude the disturbed impulses that darkened her spirit. Now, her pent-up anger blazed forth like a fierce flame. Seizing a stout switch, she sprung toward Andrew, and commenced lashing him with all her strength. Her countenance was that of a fury. For a short time, Andrew, who had great powers of endurance, bore the smarting strokes, thinking to tire his mother out; but in this he was mistaken. She was possessed of cruel spirits; and, in the blind passion with which they inspired her, would have struck on, even to the endangering of his life. At last, with a yell of pain, that sounded more like the cry of some animal than a human being, Andrew started up from the door-step, and ran off beyond the reach of his mother's arm.

"Now, away to school with you, or I'll give you as much more!" cried Mrs. Harding, as she advanced resolutely toward the place where Andrew paused on getting out of her way.

Finding that contention with his mother, under present circumstances, was rather too serious a business,

Andrew yielded to forces he was not able to resist, and started off to school, conquered, but not subdued in spirit. The fire of his mother's anger had hardened instead of softening him. Rebellion grew rank in his young breast, as he moved on his way; and no sooner was he out of sight, than he sat down on the roadside to deliberate on the question of going to school or playing the truant.

It was some time after Mrs. Harding returned into the house, before she was sufficiently calm to reflect at all. The storm, though brief, had raged fiercely, and sad were the wrecks it left behind—wrecks of peace and good resolutions. Never in her life had she suffered such intense mental pain as now—never experienced a state of mind so sad and self-condemnatory. New and better states had been forming, and they had brought her within the sphere of higher and holier influences. It was violence to these that occasioned such anguish of spirit. Good, having gained a place in her heart, might be overshadowed, but not cast out. When the storm raged, it could retire and hide itself far down in the calmer depths of her spirit, to come into perception again when the tempest abated. And thus it was now. The good was hidden, not extinguished, and its low voice was heard as soon as the wild shrieking of the storm was silent. It was not strong enough to contend with evil when evil had full sway; but, like the sunshine and the gentle dews, it possessed a restoring and creating power; and, like them, in the peaceful days and quiet nights, it went on with its heavenly work of restoration and recreation.

What a deep calm reigned in the household, as Mrs. Harding came back among her younger children, who received her with frightened looks, and went shrinking away into distant corners—a calmness which, by its contrast, only made more apparent the wild, half-insane ex-

citement from which every nerve of her spirit was still palpitating. The revulsion in Mrs. Harding's mind was great. The first rebuking image that arose in her thoughts was that of the stranger, whose coming and departure were almost like the changes in a dream. So vivid was this impression, that she almost expected to see the woman enter, and fix upon her those deep, sad eyes, whose expression she could never forget.

An unwonted sound came now upon her ears. It arose from the cradle. The eyes of Mrs. Harding sought instantly the child. Sweet one! There was a look of fear on her baby face—grievingly her lip was curled—a low murmur of pain was audible.

Tenderly, very tenderly, was the infant lifted from its cradle-bed; and lovingly was it pressed to the bosom of Mrs. Harding. Soothing words in soothing tones were poured into its ears from lips that touched them softly.

As Mrs. Harding sat with the babe held close against her heart, all the exciting incidents of the previous half hour passed before her mind in rapid review. The conduct of Andrew had been very bad, and he needed correction; but she could not justify her own action in the case, nor quiet the voice of self-reproach. She saw that the evil in her only excited the evil in him—that angry words hardened him into stubborn resistance. She felt sad, too, as she thought of the cruel stripes she had given him—stripes laid on with the full strength of her strong arm. In angry resentment, not sorrowing love, had she grasped the rod, and its strokes excited only a spirit of rebellion. Oh! how unhappy she felt—unhappy even to weeping. Her indignation against the storekeeper was but a feeble flame now. She felt too deeply humiliated in consequence of her own misdeeds to cherish anger against others.

In this state of mind the morning passed. At twelve o'clock, Andrew came in from school, gliding through

the door silently, and with an evident desire to avoid notice. Mrs. Harding said nothing. She was glad to see him subdued in spirit, and felt more of pity toward the boy than anger. Her husband soon followed, as it was dinner-time. His brow was clouded. Something had gone wrong with him during the forenoon. Silently and moodily he sat at the table, eating hurriedly, and taking no notice of any one. In a shorter time than usual, he finished the meal, and, rising, was about leaving the house, when Mrs. Harding said—

“Didn’t you tell me to send to the store for any thing I might want?”

“Certainly I did. Why?”

“Because Willits refused to let me have some sugar and rice, this morning, without the money.”

“Oh no! He couldn’t have done that. There are thirty-six dollars to my account on his books, as I told you.”

“Well, he did, then; and I had to send the money before I could get what I wanted.”

Harding waited to hear no more. “I’ll soon settle that!” he exclaimed, as he went hurriedly from the house. A rapid walk of a few minutes brought him to the store of Willits, into which he strode with a heavy, resolute tread.

“What do you mean,” was his angry interrogation, “by sending such messages to my wife?” And, as he spoke, he confronted the storekeeper with a threatening scowl.

The latter was startled, as well he might be, for Harding was in a fierce mood of mind, and stood before him with his hand clenched, and meditated violence in his look and manner.

“Say! What do you mean?” repeated Harding.

“I sent no insulting message to your wife,” said the storekeeper.

"It's false! You did!" exclaimed Harding.

"And I say that I did not," retorted Willits, whose reddening face showed his rising anger.

"Why didn't you send her the sugar and rice this morning?" said Harding.

"I did send it," replied the storekeeper.

"Not until she furnished the money."

"I beg your pardon, neighbour Harding. Andrew came for two pounds of sugar and two pounds of rice, which I have charged in your account."

"Didn't you refuse to let him have them without the money?"

"No, sir, I did not. Haven't you a balance on my books in your favour? Here are the articles charged."

And Willits opened his day-book and pointed to the recent entry.

"I don't understand this," said Harding, looking bewildered.

"There's some mistake. Who told you that I refused to send these articles without the money?"

"I must see further into this. Can't comprehend it."

And as the carpenter said this, he turned away abruptly, and went back home.

"Mary," said he, "didn't you tell me that Willits refused to let you have the rice and sugar to-day without the money?"

"Yes, I did; and I had to send the money before I could get them."

"He denies it, and has the sugar and rice both charged to me."

"What!"

"He says that he didn't refuse to let you have the articles without the money."

"Andrew!"

Mrs. Harding called to her oldest boy, in a quick,



peremptory voice, turning around as she spoke; but there was no answer.

"Andrew!" she called again.

"He's gone to school, mother," said Lucy.

"It isn't school-time yet."

"But he's gone. I saw him put on his hat, and go out through the back gate a little while after father went away."

Mr. and Mrs. Harding looked at each other for a few moments in a kind of blank amazement. To both came a dim foreshadowing of the truth.

"Did Andrew bring you that message?" said Harding, in a stern voice.

"He did; and then I gave him the money to get the things I wanted."

"And he went back with it to the store?"

"Yes."

"That will do."

How the heavy brow of the carpenter contracted! There was something savage in his face.

"He'll remember this while he has breath in his body," he said fiercely, as he left the house.

On his way to his shop, he called in again at the store of Willits, and, by a few questions, satisfied all lingering doubts as to the guilt of Andrew.

As soon as two o'clock came, he went to the school-house and asked for his son.

"He hasn't been here to-day," was the teacher's reply to his question.

"Are you certain of that, Mr. Long?"

Harding was not prepared for this.

"Altogether certain," answered the schoolmaster.

"Was Andrew here this morning?" He now addressed the scholars.

"No, sir"—"no, sir"—"no, sir"—ran all around the room.

"Have any of the boys seen him?" inquired Mr. Long.

"I saw him," spoke up one of the scholars, "as I came to school just now."

"Where?"

"Sitting on the fence over by Miller's woods."

"Did you speak to him?" inquired the schoolmaster.

"Yes, sir. I asked him what he was doing; and he said, 'Nothing.' Then I asked him if he wasn't going to school; and he said, 'Maybe so—after a while.' As I walked along, I saw him going over into Miller's woods."

"That will do," said the schoolmaster. And then he directed two of the older boys to go over to Miller's woods, and if they saw Andrew, to bring him to school.

Harding went back to his shop in a state of profound agitation. A new cause of anger against the boy was added—namely, the disgrace to himself of standing before the assembled village children as the father of a boy who had meanly played the truant.

During the afternoon, every thing seemed to go wrong with the carpenter. A man for whom he had done some work disappointed him in regard to the payment; while another, for whom work had been promised at a certain time, rated him soundly for not being up to the letter of his contract. Moreover, Stark the tavern-keeper called in and abused him for having said, as reported to him, that he was doing more harm to the neighbourhood than a gang of thieves. Maddened by this assault, coming, as it did, upon his unbalanced state of mind, Harding threw a mallet at his head, which, happily, glancing by, went smashing through a window. The frightened tavern-keeper beat a hasty retreat.

Toward evening, the teacher called in to say, that the boys sent for Andrew had found him, and that he refused to return with them to school. This was the last

crushing pound laid on the carpenter's panting self-control. The savage imprecation that fell from his lips, startled the teacher, who turned off from him instantly, and went on his way, oppressed by a feeling of troubled concern.

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## CHAPTER VII.

WHEN Jacob Harding came home from his shop a little after sundown, he was blind with passion. The more he had thought of Andrew's conduct, the stronger had grown his indignation against him; and he was now prepared to mete out to him a degree of punishment cruel in the extreme. Grief for the evil he had done was not so prominent a feeling with Harding, as anger at the boy for having dared to venture upon the commission of such flagrant outrages. "Liar! thief! truant!" Such were the bitter words that came, every few moments, through the excited father's shut teeth, as he strode homeward. "That a boy of mine should be guilty of such things!" he repeated over and over again. "A boy of mine to disgrace me in this way!"

And he would stretch forth his arms, with his large hands gripped so tightly, that the nails almost penetrated the callous skin, clutching, in imagination, the guilty child.

"Where's Andrew?" he asked, almost fiercely, as he entered the house.

Mrs. Harding lifted to him her troubled face, and answered, in a sad voice—there was no trace of anger about her—

"I haven't seen him since dinner-time."

"Not home yet?"

"No."

Harding passed through the house into the yard, where he cut from a tree a stout, tough rod—far too stout and strong for his vigorous arm to wield in the chastisement of a tender child—and returning with it, laid it in full sight of the younger children, on a table.

"A liar, a thief, and a truant!" he exclaimed, in a voice of angry excitement. "It will be the sorriest day of his life! I just want to get my hands on him!"

Mrs. Harding answered nothing. She too had felt strong anger toward the boy; but as the day wore on, and imagination pictured him writhing in the cruel hands of his passionate father, anger changed to yearning pity. Not that she felt like excusing him, or even palliating his crime and disobedience; but in her heart revived the mother's tenderness, and this made her perceive, clearly, that in a blind indignation against the boy, his father would destroy the salutary effects of punishment, through an excessive administration.

Slowly crept on the dusky twilight, and thicker and thicker fell the evening shadows, closing in nearer and nearer to the carpenter's dwelling, so that the disturbed inmates, constantly on the watch for Andrew, found their circle of vision growing momentarily narrower.

And now, sharp flashes of lightning began to stream forth from a heavy bank of cloud that lay piled up in the west, and the freshening winds rustled the leaves in the old elms that stood around the humble cottage.

"There's a gust rising!" said Mrs. Harding, in a troubled voice, going to the door and gazing anxiously around. "Where is that unhappy boy?"

"Skulking in some of the neighbours' houses," gruffly replied the husband. "But he might as well come home first as last. He can't escape me."

Mrs. Harding sighed, and was about retiring from the door, when a heavy peal of distant thunder jarred on the air.

"Oh! I wish he was home!" she said; "we're going to have a terrible storm."

The thick bank of clouds had now covered so large a space in the west, that all the sun's retiring beams were hidden, and darkness was closing around her heavy curtains.

"The storm will bring him home," was all the reply made by the father.

"I wish, Jacob," said Mrs. Harding, after waiting for nearly half an hour longer, during which time the heavy concussive thunder sounded nearer and nearer, "that you would step over to Mrs. Aaron's, and see if Andrew is not there. He goes with John Aaron a good deal, and it may be that he is loitering with him now, afraid to come home."

Harding made no answer, but took up his hat and went out. The dwelling of Mrs. Aaron was distant nearly an eighth of a mile, and thither the carpenter directed his steps, walking rapidly. It had become very dark before he reached there—the darkness invaded, every few moments, by brilliant streams of light from the cloudy west.

"Have you seen any thing of my Andrew?" inquired Harding, on reaching the neighbour's house.

"I have not," replied Mrs. Aaron, as she stood with the door held partly open.

"Is your John at home?" was next asked.

"My John? Oh yes, indeed! He's never away after dark."

John came to the side of his mother.

"Have you seen my Andrew to-day?" Harding spoke to the boy.

"No, sir; I have not. He wasn't at school either in the morning or afternoon."

"Are you certain about not having seen him to-day?"

"Oh yes, sir. He hasn't been anywhere around here."

"Where can he be?" said Mrs. Aaron, now manifesting a woman's concern.

"Dear knows!" answered the carpenter, with some impatience of manner. "I only wish I had my hands on him."

"How long has he been away?" asked Mrs. Aaron.

"Ever since dinner-time," was replied.

"Maybe he is over at Mr. Lawson's," spoke up John. "Neither Henry nor Peter Lawson were at school this afternoon. I shouldn't wonder if they'd all gone a fishing in Baxter's mill-dam."

"I'm obliged to you!" was almost roughly said by Harding, as he turned off abruptly, and strode away in the direction of Lawson's farm-house, which was at least a quarter of a mile from his own dwelling.

The darkness was now so deep, that he could see only a few steps before him, save when the broad-sheeted lightning threw its mantle of flame over the earth for an instant, and then left the night blacker than before. The flashes came in quick succession, and by their aid he walked on as steadily as if day had been abroad. At Lawson's he gained some intelligence of his truant boy. Andrew had been with Henry and Peter fishing, as was suggested by young Aaron, and had stayed there to supper. But it was more than half an hour since he started for home.

"You'll find him safe and sound when you get back," said Mr. Lawson; "so you needn't give yourself any more uneasiness about him. I didn't notice that he was staying so late, or I would have sent him away earlier. I told the boys to go with him a part of the

way, but he said he wasn't at all afraid, and went off by himself."

It did not take Harding long to retrace his steps homeward. Not in the least was his anger against the child abated, nor had he changed, in the smallest degree, his cruel purposes regarding him. He had often punished him severely; but the severity now meditated was something far beyond any prior infliction.

He was only a short distance from his dwelling, when a lightning gleam, that made the air light as noonday, showed him the form of Andrew crouching down against a large tree that stood a little off from the road. He saw it but for an instant: for, in the next moment, the blackness of darkness was around him.

"Andrew!" he called, sternly.

Ere his voice died on the air, another flash quivered along the ground; but when the lad's form had just been seen, no object was visible. Mr. Harding stood still, and awaited, in silence, the next recurring flash. It came, but Andrew was not in view.

"Andrew!" he cried again. "Andrew! why don't you answer me?"

The echo of his own voice was all the reply that came. He now advanced to the tree, felt about it in the darkness, and searched all around with his eyes, as flash after flash lit up the scene. But the form of Andrew was not again descried. He called, threatened, and called, again and again. He searched around for a considerable distance, but to no purpose. Concluding that the boy had gone home, he kept on his way, and soon arrived at his dwelling.

"Is he here yet?" was his sharp interrogation, as he stepped over the threshold.

"Haven't you found him?" asked Mrs. Harding, with a blanching face.

"He was over at Lawson's until dark, and then



started for home. I'm very sure I saw him up at the turn in the road, sitting by the foot of an old beech-tree. A flash of lightning made it as clear as day; but, when the next flash came, he was not there. I called, and called, but he wouldn't answer me. He'll come creeping in here before long. The rain will soon be pouring in torrents, and he'll never stand that."

"O Jacob!" said the mother, in a tone of distress, "I'm afraid something has happened to him."

"Never fear. He's too bad for any thing to happen to him," was the harsh response.

"Don't talk so, Jacob. It's a fearful night. There! Oh, what a sharp flash! Go out and call to him. Maybe he is close by, and afraid to come in. Tell him not to be afraid—that you won't punish him. Do, Jacob!"

"I *will* punish him, though! and I'll *not* lie about it," firmly answered Harding. "The moment I get my hands on him, I'll flog him within an inch of his life, the desperate little vagabond! A pretty race he has run me, after all his ill-doing—as if that wasn't enough."

"What a crash!" exclaimed poor Mrs. Harding, her face blanching still whiter. "Hark! is that wind or rain?"

"Both," replied her husband, coolly. "He'll not be away long now."

But the unyielding father erred in his prediction. The storm came down with fearful violence, howling among the tall elms, crashing its thunder through the air, and pouring out a deluge of rain; yet the boy ventured not to the door of his father's house, where a more dreaded evil awaited him. He could bear the elemental wrath, wild and fierce though it was, as something less to be feared than the cruel anger of his justly incensed father.

Nine, ten, eleven o'clock came; still the fearful tem-

pest roared without—still the harsh thunder boomed along the sky, or came sharply rattling down, and still nothing was seen or heard of Andrew. Almost sick with anxiety and alarm, Mrs. Harding, who had moved about the rooms incessantly—now listening at the door or window, now gazing into the darkness, and now calling the name of the boy—at length sunk down into a kind of hopeless state. That something terrible had happened to Andrew, she felt certain; for she was sure he would not remain out in storm and darkness, if he could make his way home. If softened at all toward his erring son, Harding did not manifest the change. He had walked the floor restlessly for a greater part of the evening, every now and then opening the door to look out, and calling sternly the name of Andrew, who was, he persisted in affirming, skulking somewhere near at hand. It was all in vain that the lad's mother strove to turn aside the harsh anger of his father.

"Ill not let him go to swift destruction, Mary," he would answer, with knitted brows. "I'll not be a foolish father, and spare the rod. Come when he will, he has got to feel the weight of this arm. It is all well enough for you to pity him; but I have a stern duty to perform, and mean to execute it fully."

"Try and not feel so angry against him, Jacob," pleaded the mother, laying her hand on his arm. "We know not where he is, nor how dreadfully he may be suffering. What if he should be dead! The lightning has struck very near, several times."

"I would rather see him dead now, than swinging on the gallows twenty years hence," said Harding, as he drew himself away from his tearful wife. "If he is dead, he will be safe from the evil to come; but if alive, it shall be my business to check the course of evil."

It was between eleven and twelve o'clock, when Mrs. Harding went from the family sitting-room into the

adjoining chamber, leaving her husband pacing the floor, and nursing his anger against the absent boy. The height of the storm had passed. At more distant intervals, the feeble flashes came, and the far-off thunder had a muffled roll. The winds were fast dying away, and no longer swept through the air, in howling gust, or bore the fast descending rain in fitful torrents against the windows. Every moment the rushing sound without grew less; and by the time Mrs. Harding returned from the chamber—scarce three minutes had elapsed since she left her husband—a deep stillness had succeeded the tempest's wail. She came in with so changed a countenance, that her husband could not help exclaiming—

“Why, Mary! what is it?”

“Jacob!” There was a depth of emotion in the voice of Mrs. Harding, as she grasped with both hands her husband's arm, and lifted to his face her moistened eyes, that surprised and subdued him. “Jacob,” she repeated, gently drawing him toward the chamber-door, “I want to show you something.”

Harding followed, passively.

“Look there, Jacob!” And she pointed to the low bed on which Grace was laid every night beside Lotty, and where she usually slept soundly until Mrs. Harding retired.

Harding started at what he saw, with a quick ejaculation; but his wife clung to his arm, saying, in a half whisper—

“Hush, Jacob!—don't wake them now—don't!”

The pause was fatal to his stern purpose. The face of Andrew was before him, pale and shrunken with suffering; and close beside, almost touching it, on the same pillow, was the calm, sweet, heavenly face of the babe. The boy had crept in through the window, in the height of the storm, and, after putting off his wet clothes, laid himself down beside little Grace, evidently

with the hope that her dove-like innocence would soften the fierce indignation of his father against him, and there had fallen asleep. His hair was wet, and tear-stains marked his cheeks.

"Poor boy!" almost sobbed Mrs. Harding. She was overcome with tenderness. As she breathed the words, a deep sigh parted the lips of the sleeping child, and, at the same moment, Grace, moving in her sleep, drew her little arm across his neck, and laid her warm, bright cheek to his.

It would have required a harder, sterner heart than Jacob Harding's—hard and stern as that was—to withstand the softening influence of a scene like this, coming as it did after long hours of intense excitement, and in the solemn hush succeeding a fearful tempest. A little while he stood as if spell-bound, and then turning suddenly away, left the chamber. When his wife followed him into the next room, she found him sitting in a chair, with his head bowed upon his bosom. She came up to where he sat, and leaning against him, laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Jacob," she said, softly. It was the old, old voice that now entered his ears—the voice that had sounded sweetest of all in the days when young love filled his mind with dreams of an Elysian future. He neither moved nor spoke; but his heart was melting.

"Jacob—husband—dear husband!" How many years had passed—desolate, dreary years to both their suffering spirits—since Mrs. Harding had spoken to her husband so tenderly, and in words like these!

"Say on, Mary!" And as the words passed his lips, he leaned toward her. How naturally glided her arm from his shoulder to his neck, as her heart leaped with a delicious impulse! The old, old voice, once so full of music, was ringing in her ears again. It was the voice

of her young lover—that in which he had wooed and won her in the days of innocent, confiding girlhood.

"Say on, Mary," he repeated. How gently, almost humbly, he spoke! There was not a trace of bitterness or passion in his tones.

"Think of what the poor boy has suffered to-night, Jacob. A tender child, only eight years old, exposed to such a fearful storm! Think of him as suffering and repentant, Jacob—not as stubbornly bent on continuing in wrong. He looks so pale and frightened, even in his sleep, that the sight of him makes my heart ache."

"And think, too, Mary," answered Harding, "of his great offence. Will it be right to let him go unpunished?"

"Why should he be punished?" asked Mrs. Harding.

"For his own good. He must be taught that evil deeds bring inevitable pain."

"And have they not brought pain to-night?" said Mrs. Harding. "Think, Jacob, whether, for any wrong, you would have doomed him to the anguish and fear he must have suffered to-night? I am sure you would not."

"O Mary! I dare not let him escape my severe displeasure," replied Harding, his voice taking a troubled tone. "For him to go on in this way, is certain ruin."

"It is for us to save him from evil, if in our power, Jacob. But how shall we save him. Severity, I fear, will not do it. He has been scolded, and driven, and whipped, until I sometimes think he is hardened. A number of times I have noticed of late, that when I speak mildly to him, he obeys more readily than when I am out of patience. If I order him to do any thing in an angry or imperative voice, he moves off sulkily, and, unless I follow him up, is certain to disobey me. But if I say, 'Andrew, go and do so and so, that's a good

boy,' he springs away and does the errand in the shortest time, and with evident pleasure."

"I wish to do right, Mary," said Harding, in an irresolute voice.

"No one knows that better than I do, Jacob," answered Mrs. Harding. "But what is right? Ah! that is the question. How ignorant and erring we are! We have tried hard and harsh means with our children from the beginning, and they do not seem to grow better. Let us try some gentler methods."

"But what are we to do with Andrew? Let the past go unpunished?"

"Unpunished, at least by the rod, Jacob. He expects that, and is, in some degree, prepared for it. If we deal more gently by him, and let him understand that we are grieved rather than angry at his conduct—that our punishment, whatever it may be, is given in love, not indignation—he may repent far more deeply of his evil deeds, than if stubborn anger be aroused through painful chastisement. Hush!"

Mrs. Harding raised herself up and listened, as a voice came from the room they had left a little while before. It was Andrew's voice. "O father!" they heard him say distinctly, and in a tone of fear.

Both arose quickly, and went into the chamber where he was lying.

"Don't cut me so hard, father!—don't; oh, don't." His tones were full of agony.

"I'm so wet and frightened!" he murmured, a little while afterward. "Won't the lightning strike me? Oh dear! oh dear! If father wouldn't cut me so hard!"

The heart-full mother could not keep the tears from raining over her face; and even Jacob Harding felt a woman's weakness stealing through his breast. He was about moving away from the bed where his children

slept, when Andrew started up, wide awake almost as soon as his eyes were opened.

"O father!" he exclaimed, the moment his bewildered mind was able to comprehend his true position—"don't whip me—please don't! I've been very bad; but if you don't whip me, I'll try and not be bad any more."

And he stretched forth his hands imploringly, while his colourless face had such a look of fear and sorrow, that the heart untouched by its expression must have been of adamant.

"You have been very wicked, Andrew," said his mother, in a low, serious, grieving voice; "and I do not see how your father can help punishing you."

"O mother! mother!" cried the child, bursting into tears, and bending over toward her—she had stooped down by the bedside—"I know I have been wicked, and I'm so sorry. I don't know why I did it. It seemed as if I couldn't help it. O mother! how dreadful it was out in the woods, with the thunder and lightning all around me! I was so frightened! But I was afraid to come in. I saw the candle in the window, and heard you and father call me; but I didn't dare to answer. Once, when the lightning made all as bright as day, I thought I saw Grace just a little way before me on the ground. I ran right up to the spot, but she wasn't there! Then I thought I'd get into the window, and lie down on the bed, just here, alongside of her. Maybe, I said to myself, father, who loves little Grace so much, won't whip me for her sake, if I promise not to be bad any more."

"And do you promise, Andrew?" Mrs. Harding spoke very seriously.

"I'd promise, if I thought father would believe me," sobbed the poor child.

"Promise in earnest?"

"Oh yes, mother!"



"Then ask him to forgive you, my son!"

There was a deep silence for some moments.

"Father!" Timid, hesitating, almost fearful was the voice that broke on the hushed air of the chamber.

Harding neither moved from the spot where he stood, with averted face, nor answered.

"Father! O father!"

The stern man was too much softened to resist the pleading anguish of that broken voice.

"Well, my son?" He did not mean to speak so gently; but his heart flowed into his tones.

"I've been very wicked, father." His utterance was choked, and he could say no more.

"Speak to him, Jacob," said Mrs. Harding, bending toward her husband.

"Lie down, my son, and go to sleep. You *have* been very wicked, and I intended to punish you severely; but if you *will* be a good boy, as you promise, I may forgive you."

Harding tried to speak calmly, and even a little sternly; but his voice was scarcely steady, and betrayed the powerful struggle that was going on within. As Andrew fell back, sobbing, on the pillow, from which, a little while before, he had started up in fear, his father left the chamber, deeply agitated. He wished to be alone, in order to recover his manly self-possession. His face was calm and elevated when he rejoined his wife. In both their hearts, what a wild tempest had raged, symboling the fierce storm that darkened the face of nature! But the azure depths of their spirits were clear again—clear as the starry heavens that arched above their lowly dwelling.

## CHAPTER VIII.

MR. LONG, the village schoolmaster, after leaving the carpenter, took his way homeward, oppressed by a troubled feeling. He was a man of humane impulses, and these were excited by the cruel threats and savage looks of Harding. Andrew's offence was heinous, deserving more than ordinary marks of displeasure; and he had, himself, been thinking over various modes of punishment, in order, if possible, to select that which would be most efficacious, when the young truant presented himself in the morning. Miss Gimp, the dress-maker, was at his house when he returned home. She was doing some work for Mrs. Long, and dropped in with it a little before supper-time. Very naturally, she was invited to remain until after tea. Indeed, Miss Gimp was generally a welcome guest, for she was chatty, and knew the weak side of every woman in the neighbourhood. She was, moreover, in possession of all the current gossip—good-natured and ill-natured—floating about, far and near, and had a way peculiar to herself, and racy withal, of telling every thing she knew, and a little more sometimes.

"You look sober, Edward," said the schoolmaster's wife, as her eyes rested on her husband's face, soon after he came in. "Don't you feel well?"

"Something has happened that troubles me," replied Mr. Long. And then he looked more serious.

How quickly was the head of Miss Gimp elevated! What a sparkling interest was in her two bright eyes!

"Trouble you, Edward? What is it?"

A shade of anxiety flitted across the pleasant face of Mrs. Long.

"Nothing that particularly concerns myself," replied the schoolmaster.

"Any thing wrong in the school?"

"There's something wrong about one of the scholars. Andrew Harding has been playing truant."

"The ne'er do well!" exclaimed Miss Gimp; not so much in sorrow or anger, as from a species of unconscious satisfaction at hearing a piece of bad news.

"I'm afraid that boy will come to an evil end," remarked Mrs. Long.

"He'll come to the gallows, without doubt," said Miss Gimp. "I never saw his match. Not for a mountain of gold would I live in the house with him. I pity his poor mother; but, then, she has herself to blame. I never saw a woman have so little management with children. She lets them do as they please, and make as much noise and disorder as they like, until she gets so worried she can't stand it any longer; and then she screams at them, and boxes their ears right and left, in a way to make one's blood cold. That's no way to bring up children."

"Indeed, it is not," was the quiet response of the schoolmaster's wife.

"Why, d'ye know," ran on Miss Gimp, "that on one occasion of my being there to fit a dress for Mrs. Harding, Andrew—a little imp of Satan he is—forgive me for saying so—Andrew threw a large case-knife at his sister Lucy. It came as nigh cutting her ear off as could be—just touching it with the edge as it glanced by. If you had seen the passion of his mother! It was awful! She grew almost black in the face; and I thought she would never get done beating the boy. It made me sick at heart. Oh! she is a woman of an awful temper!

I wouldn't have her tongue on me for the world. And so Andrew has been playing the truant, ha!"

How the voice of Miss Gimp changed, as she recollected herself!

"I am grieved to say that he has," answered the schoolmaster, gravely.

"Does his father know it?" asked Mrs. Long.

"Yes; and I am sorry to say, is in a most dreadful passion about it. I called at his shop as I came home just now, and the way he looked and spoke made me really shudder."

"He's a cruel-tempered man," said Miss Gimp. "I know all about him. His father was little better than a savage, and used to beat his children about as if they were dogs."

"I pity Andrew, from my heart," said Mr. Long. "He has acted very badly; but he is only a tender child, needing correction for his fault, but not able to bear the cruelty in store for him. I feel unhappy about it."

"How would it do," suggested Mrs. Long, "for you to go over, after tea, and try to soothe his father, and thus break the heavy weight of his displeasure?"

"Just what I was thinking about," said Mr. Long.

"I wouldn't do any such thing," spoke up Miss Gimp, quickly. "Take my advice, and don't go near him. He's a very strange man. As sure as you do, he'll insult you; and, what is worse, beat Andrew twice as badly, from a fresh excitement of angry feelings."

"There may be something in that," remarked the schoolmaster's wife.

"There is something in it," said Miss Gimp. "People like them can't bear interference from others; and always repel intrusion by broad insult. Let them alone, Mr. Long, to do with their own as they please. More harm than good will arise from any attempt you

may make to screen the young rebel. It's all very kind, very humane in you, Mr. Long, and does great credit to your heart; but you can't help them any."

"There may be truth in your suggestion," answered the schoolmaster, in some doubt and irresolution—he was flattered, in spite of himself, by Miss Gimp's compliment—"and yet it does not seem right to leave a helpless child in the hands of a man insane from anger, and not make an effort to save him from excessive cruelty."

Tea was soon after on the table. Mr. Long, still undecided in his mind, sat thoughtful and nearly silent during the meal, while Miss Gimp rattled on, much to the edification of Mrs. Long, who, in her agreeable tittle-tattle, quite forgot poor Andrew Harding. A sudden roll of distant thunder interrupted the voluble play of the gossip's tongue.

"What's that!" she exclaimed—"not a gust coming up?"

Mr. Long went to the door, and threw a glance around the horizon.

"There are some heavy clouds in the west," said he.

"And it threatens rain," added Miss Gimp, who now stood by his side. "Get me my bonnet, if you please, Mrs. Long," said she, turning to the schoolmaster's wife. "It's growing dark fast, and I must run home."

"Don't be in a hurry. It isn't late. I'm sure it won't storm to-night," said Mrs. Long, affecting a great deal of reluctance at parting with Miss Gimp, who, in her turn, had just enough self-esteem to believe that the schoolmaster's wife felt really bad about her "going away so early."

Often, during the fearful storm that raged that night, did Mr. Long think of Andrew Harding, and wonder how it was with him. He could not forget the cruel

face and words of the boy's father: they haunted his imagination and his thoughts.

On the next morning, he went early, as was his custom, to the school-house. He was sitting at his desk, engaged in study, when the sound of footsteps caused him to look up. It was too soon to expect any of the scholars, and he was, therefore, prepared to see a stranger. He almost started, as he saw the carpenter leading his son, and within a few steps of the door.

"Mr. Long, I have brought Andrew to school this morning."

Harding had paused with one foot across the threshold. He spoke in a steady voice, rather below his ordinary tone. "I preferred coming early, before the other scholars arrived, as I wished to say a word about the lad."

"Won't you step in?" said the schoolmaster, quite taken by surprise at the manner of his visitor, in which was nothing of the fierce indignation apparent at their last interview.

"No, I thank you. You can go in, Andrew."

The boy entered quietly, and went with a stealthy step to his usual seat.

"I called to say, Mr. Long," resumed the carpenter, "that Andrew promises, if you will forgive him, never again to be guilty of such bad conduct. I think his punishment has already been severe enough, and of a character not likely soon to be forgotten. He has been very wicked, but, I think, repents sincerely."

"I am not angry with him," said the schoolmaster, "but grieved that any scholar of mine should commit that most disgraceful of all offences—playing the truant. If you think he has been sufficiently punished, and sincerely repents, the matter can rest where it is; but I will not promise, for the future, should he offend again. The example would be too pernicious."

"I think you can trust him," answered the carpenter, as he moved back a few steps from the door. "Good morning," he added, after standing silent for a moment or two, and went away.

Mr. Long felt rather strangely on finding himself alone with the boy, after this brief interview with Harding. In both the father and son, a striking change was apparent. As to the basis of the change, he was altogether ignorant. The natural conclusion to which his mind came, almost without reflection, was, that the carpenter had punished his child with a measure of severity from which his own better consciousness now revolted, and that, as some reparation for his cruelty, he now sought to screen him from further consequences. That both were greatly subdued, was apparent at a glance.

"Andrew," said the schoolmaster. He spoke kindly, but seriously.

The child looked up timidly.

"Come here, Andrew."

The boy left his seat, and came toward the schoolmaster, with a slow movement, his eyes fixed earnestly and inquiringly upon his face.

There were unmistakable marks of suffering and fear in that young countenance; and, as Mr. Long noted them, pity for the lad and a new interest in regard to him were awakened in his mind.

"Poor boy!" It was his involuntary mental ejaculation. Scarcely thinking of what he was doing, he took Andrew, by the hand, and said, kindly—

"I am sorry you were so naughty yesterday. How came you to do so?"

The child's lips quivered a moment, and his eyes fell to the ground. A little while he stood silent.

"How came you to do so, Andrew?" The voice that said this was kind and encouraging.

"I don't know, Mr. Long," was answered; and now



the boy's clear eyes—the schoolmaster was struck with the softness of their expression—were raised to his. “It seemed as if I couldn't help it. I didn't think much, at first, what I was doing; but when I got a going, it was like running down hill. I could not stop myself.”

“You are sorry about it, are you not, Andrew?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Long. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I wish I hadn't done it.”

“You will never do so again?”

“Not if I can help it, Mr. Long.”

“You can help it, Andrew,” said the schoolmaster, in a serious voice. “Every one can help doing wrong.”

“I don't know.” The child spoke half to himself, and in a tone so sad, that the schoolmaster was touched by it. “It seems as if I couldn't help it, sometimes.”

“Do you ever say your prayers, on going to bed at night?” asked the schoolmaster, after a few moments of thoughtful silence.

“I used to say them a good while ago; but I never do now,” was answered.

“You must begin again, Andrew, if you desire to be a good boy. Begin this very night. Do not get into bed until you have knelt down and said, ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’ Do Lotty and Philip say their prayers at night?”

“No, sir. Mother doesn't teach any of us to say our prayers.”

“Do you ever read in the Bible?”

“Mother won't let me have the Bible.”

“Why not?”

“She says I dirty the leaves and pictures.”

“Have you no Testament?”

“No, sir.”

“If I give you one, will you read in it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well, Andrew, I will bring you a Testament this afternoon, and it shall be yours if you will learn a verse in it every day.”

The lad's face brightened with real pleasure.

“Not all evil—no, not all evil!” were the schoolmaster's earnestly, inward spoken words. “The innocence of childhood has been trampled on and overlaid; but there is good ground still, ready for the hand of culture.”

“Andrew,” said he, after a slight pause, “you must be on your guard when the other boys come to school. It is known that you have played truant, and some of them will be sure to say unkind things to you about it. Try and not get angry—try hard, and I'm sure you can help it. Don't seem to mind what they say, and they'll soon let you alone.”

The form of a boy darkened the door at this moment, and the conference of Andrew and the schoolmaster was at an end.

## CHAPTER IX.

It was evening. Lotty and Grace were sleeping, side by side, and Philip, a restless, rather fretful child of four years, had some time since been taken off to bed. Mrs. Harding, having cleared away the supper things, now busily plied her needle. Her husband was near her, by the table, his head resting on his hand, and his mind busy with a new train of thoughts that occupied it almost per force. Side by side, on two low chairs, sat Andrew and his sister Lucy, younger by two years. Andrew held open in his hands the Testament given him, according to promise, by Mr. Long, and he was reading from it in a low voice, while Lucy leaned toward him, listening intently. The mother's ears were open, as well as Lucy's, and took in every word; and it was not long before Harding began to listen also. Andrew was reading of the birth of Christ in the city of Bethlehem, and of the wise men who came from the East, guided by the star that heralded his wonderful advent. It was many, many years since the words of this strange history had been in his thoughts; and now they came to him with a newly awakening interest. Andrew read on—of the angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream, warning him of the evil designs of Herod—of the cruel slaughter of the Innocents—of John the Baptist preaching repentance in the wilderness of Judea—and of the baptism of the Saviour in Jordan.

All unconscious that his father and mother were listening, the boy continued to read. What a power was in the divine word, coming to their ears, as it did, borne on the voice of a child! There was a wonderful fascination

about every fact and every holy sentiment. They saw, in imagination, Jesus led up, of the Spirit, into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil; and when the rebuked tempter left him, they felt a sense of pleasure at the triumph of good over evil, that passed with a low thrill to the profoundest depths of their being. In the call of Simon and Andrew, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, they almost seemed to hear the Lord speaking to them, and calling them to a new life. They saw him going about through Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. And when he went up into a mountain, and taught from thence the multitude, the divine words he uttered came to them with a spirit and power that lifted their souls into higher regions, and gave them perceptions of truths such as had never come to them before.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”

Many times, in earlier days—days in which some rosy gleams from the morning of childhood mingled with the colder light of selfish maturity—had they heard these beautiful sentences; but never had the words so penetrated their souls; never had they felt such a sad, almost hopeless yearning to rise into the holy states of the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemaker.

Still Andrew read on, unconscious that other ears than Lucy's were hearkening to his utterance intently.

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

A low sigh from the mother's heart trembled, scarce audibly, on the air.

"Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths. But I say unto you, Swear not at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; neither by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black; but let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these, cometh of evil."

"Cometh of evil—cometh of evil." How the words sounded in the ears of Jacob Harding, over and over again, as if spoken directly to him!

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you: that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

Tired with reading aloud, Andrew now closed his Testament, and said, in a kind way, to his sister—

"Come, Lucy—let's go to bed."

Lucy made no objection, and the two children, who had learned to wait on themselves, took a candle, and went off to their chamber, up stairs, without a cross or angry word—something so unusual, that both father and mother noted it with surprise.

Plying her needle, sat Mrs. Harding, and near her, his hand shading his face from the light, was her husband, almost motionless. In the minds of both lingered

passages just read from the Word of Life, while a deep calmness pervaded their spirits. Not so much rebuked were they by the truths, condemnatory of the past, which seemed spoken anew, as inspired by a dawning hope of something better in the future. A dim foreshadowing of better and happier states came to both, and with it an awakening tenderness each for the other, and a deeper, purer, more unselfish love for their children.

A little while they had heard Andrew and Lucy moving about in the chamber above; then all was still. Presently there stole down a low murmur. The mother's hand rested in her lap, and she raised her head to listen.

"What is that?" she said, rising and going to the foot of the stairway.

"Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts"——

This much she heard distinctly, in the voice of Andrew.

The murmuring sound was continued for a little while, and then all was silent.

"What was it?" asked Harding, as his wife came back to her seat by the table.

A moment or two Mrs. Harding gazed into her husband's face, as if to read his state of mind, and then answered——

"It was Andrew, saying his prayers."

The hand that had been withdrawn from between the light and his face, was quickly restored to its position by Harding, who turned himself a little farther away from observation, and did not speak for nearly half an hour. That time was spent in an almost involuntary review of the past, and in partially formed purposes to live a better life in the future; if not for his own sake, at least for the sake of his children.

Very gently did sleep draw her dusky curtains around the weary heads of Mr. and Mrs. Harding that night.

Morning found their spirits calm, hopeful, and yearning for the better life, of whose beatitudes came to them some partial glimpses as they listened to the words of the Saviour, teaching the multitudes that gathered to hear, as he sat upon the mountain of Galilee.

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## CHAPTER X.

ONE day, a few weeks later in the course of events we are recording, Miss Gimp was a little fluttered by seeing a handsome carriage draw up before her humble dwelling. She looked, of course, for a richly dressed lady to emerge from so elegant a vehicle; but, instead, a plainly attired girl, evidently a domestic in some family, stepped upon the ground. The dressmaker was already in the door.

"Does Miss Gimp live here?" asked the girl.

"That is my name: will you walk in?" said the dressmaker.

The girl entered, and took the chair that was proffered.

"Are you very busy at this time?" she inquired.

"Not very," answered Miss Gimp.

"Have you a week to spare?"

"I don't know about that," replied the dressmaker.

"Who wants me for a week?"

"Mrs. Barclay."

"Mrs. Barclay, over at Beechwood?"

"Yes. You made a dress for her last fall, I believe."

"Yes. When does she want me?"



"Right away, if you can come."

Miss Gimp considered a little while.

"I have two dresses to finish," said she; "after that, I can go to Mrs. Barclay."

"How long will it take you to finish these dresses?" asked the girl.

"To-day and to-morrow."

"Then you can come the day after to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I'll say so to Mrs. Barclay. At what time in the morning will you be ready?"

"As early as you please."

"Say nine o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Very well," said the girl; "I will be over for you, in the carriage, by that time."

Miss Gimp was very good at promising, and at performing also, when it suited her to keep her engagements. In the present case, she meant to be as good as her word, even though in keeping her word to Mrs. Barclay, she broke it to her very particular friends, Mrs. Jarvis and the storekeeper's wife, for both of whom she had promised to make dresses, as soon as the work on hand was finished. The Barclays were wealthy people, and she could afford to disappoint her less pretending neighbours, for the sake of making favour with them.

According to appointment, the handsome carriage drew up before the dressmaker's door exactly at nine o'clock on the day agreed upon, and Miss Gimp, conscious of having acquired a new importance, was soon reposing among its luxurious cushions. Past the dwelling of Mrs. Willits drove the elegant vehicle, and Miss Gimp did not fail to lean from the window, to throw a smile at the storekeeper's wife, who exclaimed to herself—

“Why, bless us! What does all this mean?”

A brisk drive of half an hour brought them to the stately residence of the Barclays—the finest within a circle of twenty miles. Mrs. Barclay, a handsome but dignified woman—her age was not over thirty-five—received the dressmaker kindly, but with a manner that at once repelled all gossiping familiarity. She had sent for her as a workwoman, to perform a needed service, and wished for nothing beyond; and it was but a little while before Miss Gimp understood this clearly. Two or three times during the first day, she tried to draw Mrs. Barclay out; but it was of no use—the lady wanted her skill as a dressmaker; but, beyond this, neither asked nor received any thing.

“Proud—haughty—stuck up!” Many times did Miss Gimp repeat these words to herself, by way of consolation in her disappointment at not being questioned by Mrs. Barclay about people for whom she had worked. There were the Wilsons and the Mayfields—she had made dresses for them, and quietly intimated the fact—of whom, considering their position, Mrs. Barclay must want to hear the dressmaker’s opinion. But not the slightest sign of interest was manifested by the lady. Once or twice Miss Gimp alluded to them, in a way that she believed would draw Mrs. Barclay out; but the allusion was met by a frigid silence.

Mrs. Barclay had a daughter in her fifteenth year, who, though but a child, was as reserved to the dressmaker as her mother. Miss Gimp tried hard to win her confidence by a chatty familiarity; but Florence repelled all these advances—politely, yet effectually.

On the second day of Miss Gimp’s rather uncomfortable sojourn in this family, where she was appreciated only for her skill in mantua-making, she heard Mrs. Barclay remark to her daughter in a low voice—

“Your aunt Edith Beaufort will be here to-morrow.”

"She will!" There was a tone of surprise in the voice of Florence that instantly quickened the ears of Miss Gimp, who bent closer to her work in order to seem entirely absorbed therein.

"Yes. I got a note from her a little while ago. Jacob brought it over," answered the mother.

"I thought she was going back to Clinton, after finishing her visit to Mrs. Larch."

"She intended doing so when she left here; but she wants to see your father about some business matters that she says needs his attention."

"How long is she going to stay?" inquired Florence.

"A week, she says."

"I don't like aunt Edith, and I can't help it," remarked Florence. "I never feel pleasant when she is here; and am always relieved from a kind of pressure on my feelings when she goes."

"You should try to overcome this," said Mrs. Barclay. "Your aunt is always kind, and, I think, much attached to you. She has her peculiarities, as we all have; and toleration of individual peculiarities, as I have often said to you, is a common duty we owe to each other."

"I often wish, mother," replied the girl, in a gentler tone, "that I were more like you—that I could forget and deny myself for the sake of others, as much as you do."

"It is not in our power," answered Mrs. Barclay, "to love others and seek their good by a mere effort of the mind. Desire is fruitless, unless it flows into action. What we have to do, is to be externally kind and forbearing—to do that good for others which reason and religion enjoin upon us. This may require some effort and self-denial in the beginning; but acts, from right principles, form vessels in the mind, into which affections can flow and find a permanent abiding place.

What is mere duty at first, becomes ultimately a delight."

Florence bent her head, listening attentively, and seeking to find, in her mother's earnestly spoken words, the power to overcome. And she did receive strength.

Miss Gimp, whose ears had taken in every word of this conversation, was puzzled to comprehend its entire meaning. The words she understood; but to hear such words from the lips of Mrs. Barclay, whom she had regarded only as a proud woman of the world, bewildered her. Could they be spoken sincerely? Yet there was no room for doubt. They were the utterance of a mother—made only for the ears of a beloved and confiding child. In spite of her wounded self-love, Miss Gimp could not but feel respect for Mrs. Barclay. From that time, she was subdued and reserved in her presence.

On the next day, aunt Edith Beaufort came. She was a woman past the middle age; tall and dignified in person; somewhat proud and stately in her carriage; and with an eye that, when it looked at any one steadily, seemed to reach inward to the very thoughts. A close observer would not fail to observe a certain cloaking of her own purposes. While she sought to penetrate every one, she as sedulously kept herself impenetrable.

Mrs. Beaufort had none of the high-minded scruples that prevented her sister-in-law, Mrs. Barclay, from listening to the idle or malicious gossip of the dressmaker. On the other hand, she rather encouraged Miss Gimp to talk. On the morning after her arrival, Mrs. Barclay and her daughter rode out. They were gone a couple of hours, and a portion of this time was spent by Mrs. Beaufort in the department where the dressmaker was at work.

"What kind of a man," said she, during a pause in

Miss Gimp's tittle-tattle, "is your carpenter? Harding, I believe, is his name."

"Oh, a very bad sort of a man," promptly answered Miss Gimp. "The worst man I ever knew."

A slight shadow flitted over the countenance of Mrs. Beaufort, and there was a perceptible huskiness in her voice as she said—

"Bad in what way?"

"Why in every way."

"Bad-tempered?" inquired Mrs. Beaufort.

"You'd think so, if you'd ever seen him among his children. He came near killing his oldest boy two or three weeks ago."

"How?"

"He stole money, and lied, and played truant into the bargain. His father beat him almost to death."

"He did!"

"Yes, indeed! The poor little fellow is only eight years old, and if he did do wrong, wasn't to be treated like a dog or a vicious horse."

Mrs. Beaufort sighed, and fell into a state of mental abstraction, from which the dressmaker soon aroused her, by saying—

"The strangest and saddest thing of all is, somebody left a little helpless infant at their door not long since."

Mrs. Beaufort started.

"Well, what of it?" she said, partially averting her face.

"What of it? They might as well have placed a lamb among wolves."

"You speak strongly, Miss Gimp." Mrs. Beaufort now fixed her eyes upon her with a searching look. "Have you heard of their ill-treating the child?"

"Not particularly," answered Miss Gimp. "The fact is, nobody hardly ever goes there. But what are

you to expect of people who treat their own children as if they were wild animals, instead of human beings?"

"Have you seen the stranger baby of whom you speak?" inquired the lady.

"Oh yes."

"What kind of a baby is it?"

"One born for a better lot than that which has been so cruelly assigned to it. The mother who could desert that child had a heart of stone. It is the sweetest, loveliest little darling that ever I saw; and everybody says the same."

"Does no one suspect from whence it came?"

Miss Gimp looked knowing, as she answered—

"Every one has the liberty of guessing, you know, madam."

"True. But what ground for guessing is there in the present case?"

"We know one thing for certain," replied Miss Gimp.

"It came not a hundred miles from Beechwood."

"Ah!"

Mrs. Beaufort manifested some surprise.

"What reason have you for saying this?"

"The woman who left it at Harding's was seen."

"Who saw her?"

There was, on the part of Mrs. Beaufort, an evident desire to conceal the interest she felt in the subject, which did not escape the quick penetration of Miss Gimp.

"Harry Wilkins, a neighbour of mine, saw her. He met her carrying a basket, as he was going over to Beechwood. She acted strangely, and this caused him to notice her. As he was returning home, he met her again, without the basket. It was on the very evening the babe was found."

"And that is all you know about it?" said Mrs.

Beaufort, the earnestness of manner, shown a little while before, all gone.

"All I know now, certainly, but not all I expect to know," replied Miss Gimp. "Harry Wilkins says that he got a good look at the young woman's face, and that he would know it again among thousands. He thought he saw her about two weeks ago, and, if it hadn't been just where it was, he would have been sure of it."

The interest of Mrs. Beaufort reawakened.

"Where did he think he saw her?" she inquired.

"Over at Clifton."

Mrs. Beaufort started. The eyes of Miss Gimp were fixed intently upon the lady, in whose face she read much more than Mrs. Beaufort wished to reveal. The two looked earnestly at each other for some moments, and then their eyes fell to the floor. Nearly a minute of silence followed. Mrs. Beaufort then said, with apparent indifference—

"Over at Clifton?"

"Yes, ma'am. He was riding over there to see a man on some business, when, just as he came in sight of the village, a carriage drove by, having in it two ladies. One of them, he is almost sure, was the woman he saw on the night the child was found. If her veil hadn't been partly over her face, he would have been in no doubt. He says he turned his horse, and rode after the carriage until he saw where it stopped."

"He did?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did he describe the house?"

"Yes. It was a large, old-fashioned stone house, with beautiful grounds about it."

"Didn't he ask who lived there?"

"Yes; but he forgot the name. He's going over there in a few weeks, and then he will learn all he can



about the people who live in the house. So you see, ma'am, we're likely to find out something."

Mrs. Beaufort made no answer, but sat lost in the tangled maze of her own thoughts for a long time. Ever and anon the dressmaker would cast stealthy glances toward her, but the lady seemed all unconscious of observation. Her face, now in repose, and taking its hue from the tenor of her thoughts, was one to puzzle a wiser physiognomist than Miss Gimp. Its expression, even, she could see, was bad—bad, as indicating the long predominance of selfish purposes and an overmastering self-will. And yet it contained traces of an old beauty. The lines were sharpened by pride and passion, not rounded by a debasing sensuality. Yet was not all bad. A softness about the delicately formed mouth and gently receding chin, showed that all the true woman in her had not suffered obliteration. Without speaking, she at length arose, and went from the apartment with a slow, stately step.

"I'll read that riddle before I'm done with it," said the dressmaker, letting her hands fall into her lap, the moment she was alone, and raising her body into an erect position. "My lady knows all about this matter, or I'm mistaken. Let me see. Clifton? Didn't Florence Barclay say something about her aunt's going back to Clifton? Be sure, she did! I remember it now distinctly."

What a light came into the shrivelled face of Miss Gimp!

"And then," she continued, "what interest, I wonder, could a woman like her feel in a man like Harding, if there were not something behind the curtain? How did *she* know there *was* such a man? It's all clear as daylight. I see it as plain as I do that butterfly on the window. I'll call at Harry Wilkins', as soon as I go home, and tell him to be sure and find out the name of

them people the next time he goes over to Clifton. I wouldn't be much afraid to bet"——

The door opened, and Mrs. Beaufort re-entered. She had a silk dress in her hand, one of the breadths of which had received an ugly fracture.

"Can you mend that neatly for me?" said she, as she held the dress toward Miss Gimp.

The latter examined the rent.

"The edges are very much frayed out; but I will do the best I can."

"I would like you to do it now. I wish to wear the dress this afternoon."

Miss Gimp laid aside the work on which she was engaged, and commenced repairing the damaged silk, while Mrs. Beaufort sat by, looking on.

"You think," said the latter, speaking as if she were continuing a conversation, "that your neighbours will ill-treat the babe?"

"If they ill-treat their own children, what can you hope for other people's that fall into their hands? It's my opinion that the neighbours ought to take it away from them, and send it to the poor-house; and I've said so from the beginning. But what is everybody's business is nobody's business."

"Is Harding getting along pretty well?" Mrs. Beaufort inquired, after a pause.

"Men like him never get along well," answered the uncompromising dressmaker.

"Isn't he a good workman?"

"The best in twenty miles round, I've heard it said. But what does that signify?"

"Does he drink?"

"He's seen too often at Stark's tavern, if that indicates any thing. I can't say that he gets drunk; but you know to what tavern-going leads."

"Is he at all beforehand in the world?" inquired the lady.

"He's in debt at the store. Mrs. Willits told me this herself, and that her husband was going to stop trusting him. That doesn't look very much to me as if he was beforehand."

Mrs. Beaufort sighed gently, as if some unpleasant thought had flitted across her mind. Then she changed the subject, and did not once again allude to it, even remotely. After the torn dress was mended, she thanked Miss Gimp, with a reserved and dignified air, and withdrew from the room. The dressmaker did not see her again, and only learned, incidentally, that she left for her home on the next morning.

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## CHAPTER XI.

THE feeble aspirations for a better life, which had been awakened in the breast of Jacob Harding, struggled not toward activity without frequent assaults from the tempter. Too deeply interwoven, in the very texture of his moral nature, were evil inclinations, made strong by long indulgence, for good to gain an easy victory. His life, for years, had been one of disorder, internal as well as external; and now, when there came to him faint and far-off glimpses of the beauty and desirableness of order, virtue, and religion, the new creation—it could be nothing less—seemed so near to an impossibility, that his heart bowed, at times, hopeless—almost despairing.

External causes of disturbance were added to the

awakening conflict within. On some days, every thing would go wrong with him, and he would return to his home, when evening closed, in so fretted a state of mind, that his coming fell upon his household like a shadow. But the shadow darkened only for a little while. The presence of Grace was a perpetual sunshine; and even the dense clouds that gathered, at times, around the carpenter's stormy spirit, could not shut out the light and warmth diffused so genially around her. With the babe in his arms, or lying against his breast, the enemies of his spirit assaulted him in vain. Deeply disturbed though he might have been by the conflicts of the day, peace now folded her wings in his heart. However much doubt and despondency, arising from worldly disappointments, had overshadowed him with gloom, the soft cheek of the little one was never laid against his own without his feeling a tranquil confidence that, even as God was providing for the helpless innocent, so would he provide for him. In the clear depths of her beautiful eyes, he always saw a light that seemed to make plainer the way before him.

But, had not the babe's influence been felt by others of his household, as well as by himself, Harding would have struggled for self-conquest in vain. Happily, over all, the silent power of her beauty and innocence continued to prevail; and, in a marked degree, over Mrs. Harding. Thus, in the better life, up to which all were voluntarily or involuntarily aspiring, a kind of equipoise was established. The disturbed forces had received a new and better adjustment. One great gain on the part of both Harding and his wife was this: each had learned to repress the utterance of captious or ill-natured words. In former times, unkindness of thought found ever a quick outbirth in harsh, exciting language, that never failed to produce a storm of passion. These storms, and their often fearful ravages, each remembered too well;

and in the mind of each was a sufficient dread of their recurrence to induce a watchful self-control.

Since the fearful night in which Andrew suffered so many terrors, there had been a marked change in this wayward boy. Mr. Long, the schoolmaster, seeing the impression that remained, and feeling for him a kind interest, made it a point to notice him, and, as carefully and judiciously as was in his power, awaken and foster his self-respect. At least once a week, he would drop in at the carpenter's, and never failed, on these occasions, to speak a word in praise of Andrew's good conduct and studiousness. The lad's gratified look, whenever this was done, gave him broad ground of hope for the future.

The change in Andrew was another readjusted weight in the balancing of moral forces to which we have referred. Without this particular readjustment, the new equipoise seen in the carpenter's family could hardly have been maintained. Little trouble was required in the management of the younger children, now that Andrew's baleful influence over them was, in a great measure, withdrawn; and this left a diminished evil pressure on the temper of Mrs. Harding.

A man like Jacob Harding is never a popular man. He is sure to offend in his business intercourse with others, and to make enemies. Of the carpenter, there were few to speak a good word, beyond the fact that no better workman than he was to be found. This reputation had insured him work that otherwise would have found its way to the shop of a better-natured, but in no way so reliable a mechanic, who lived in Beechwood. But there are men who will sacrifice their interests quicker than their feelings. Two of this class, who had employed the carpenter for some years, and given him a good deal of work in that time, becoming offended in consequence of some hasty words on the part of Harding,

withdrew their patronage and influence, and gave both to a young beginner in a neighbouring village. One of these men was about erecting a handsome dwelling, for which Harding had furnished a part of the plans, and in the building of which he had expected to make a better profit than usually fell to his share. On learning the decision that had been made in favour of a rival workman, the carpenter was oppressed with a sense of discouragement so great, that it seemed to him as if a high mountain were suddenly thrown across his path. Not as had been usual with him, when things went wrong, did he give way to a burst of passion, when the fact was announced that his old customers had withdrawn their work.

"All right," he answered, in a voice of forced calmness; and the messenger who brought the intelligence left his shop, little dreaming that the seemingly unmoved carpenter had wellnigh staggered under his words as if they had been heavy blows. Upon these two customers, Harding had depended for the best of his season's work. All his other engagements were of minor importance, and the profit to accrue therefrom scarcely sufficed to provide food for his table. Of the causes leading to this result he was by no means ignorant. In his last interview with both of the parties, he had suffered himself to get very much annoyed at certain propositions which he thought involved a question of his honesty. Rough and plain spoken, he flung back upon them the fancied imputation in so offensive a manner as to make them angry, and they left him under a good deal of excitement. This, he doubted not, would pass off, and leave them ready to complete arrangements with him as before. But the sequel showed his error.

Never before had the carpenter's way seemed so closely hedged—never had he felt such an oppressive sense of doubt and fear as he looked into the future.

Work he had usually had in plenty. It came crowding in upon him from all sides, and he was oftener worried on account of its superabundance than concerned for its continuance. He had not always executed with promptness; and to this fact might be traced one of the causes of his want of thrift.

It was nearly half an hour after this unpleasant intelligence had been received, and Harding stood leaning on his work-bench, the chisel with which he had been cutting a mortice resting idly in his hand, when a form darkened his shop-door, and a familiar voice said—

“Good afternoon, friend Harding!”

The carpenter lifted his eyes, and met the pleasant, always cheerful face of Mr. Long, the schoolmaster, who was on his way home after the close of his afternoon session.

“You seem troubled,” said the latter. Harding had looked at him, without replying. “There’s nothing wrong with you, I hope? I thought I’d just drop in to say that Andrew is getting on finely.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” There was a huskiness in the carpenter’s voice, that betrayed his unhappy state.

“None of your family sick, I hope?” said Mr. Long, with a kind interest that won upon the carpenter’s feelings.

“All reasonably well, I thank you.”

“Any thing wrong in your business?”

“I’m sorry to say that there is,” replied Harding. “I have just lost my whole season’s work.”

“How comes that?” said Mr. Long.

“Two buildings that I had engaged have gone into the hands of another carpenter, and I am left without a single contract of any importance.”

“This is bad,” remarked the schoolmaster.

“It is bad for a man in my situation, with a large family on his hands. What I am to do, Heaven only knows!”



Mr. Long was struck with the tone of despondency in which these words were uttered. Obeying the prompting impulse of the moment, he answered—

“You may trust in Heaven, Mr. Harding. He that feedeth the ravens will not suffer you to want.”

The words of the schoolmaster produced a momentary disturbance in the mind of Harding, who replied, with some bitterness of manner—

“Oh! as for me, I don’t pretend to have any claims on Heaven.”

“All men,” replied Mr. Long, “have claims on their Maker for things needful to sustain life, and give them the ability to perform useful service in the world. For these you may look with confidence. Providence never hedges up a man’s way in one direction, without seeing that it is opened in another. All will come out right, neighbour Harding—never fear.”

“But I do fear,” was the desponding answer. “To my knowledge, no one else is going to build this summer. Unless there comes a hurricane, unroofing half a dozen barns and houses, I see no chance of a sufficiency of work during the season.”

Harding said this with affected humour; yet his tones failed to conceal the bitterness and distrust within.

“Not a good direction for any one’s thoughts to flow,” said Mr. Long, seriously. “Providence will open the way before you, I trust, without the aid of hurricanes, or any other ministers of destruction.”

“I hope so; but I see little to encourage me.”

Even while the carpenter said this, a neighbouring farmer entered his shop, and asked the question—

“Are you very busy just now, Mr. Harding?”

“Not particularly so,” was answered.

“Will you call over, and see me in the morning? I wish to talk with you about putting a new roof on my barn. I did think of trusting it until next spring, but

I've been examining it rather closely to-day, and don't think it will be safe to run the risk, especially as there is every prospect of large crops this summer. In fact, I've decided to have a new roof. So, if you'll call over to-morrow morning, we will arrange to have it done."

Harding promised to see the farmer bright and early on the next morning. Receiving this assurance, the latter departed. The schoolmaster had remained during this brief interview, and when the farmer left, remarked, with a smile—

"It is true as I said, neighbour Harding. Providence never hedges up a man's way in one direction, without opening it in another."

"But what's the use of it all?" replied the carpenter. "I would call this kind of business mere child's play. Smith's money is just as good as Jones's, and will buy as much pork and corn meal. And as for the work, one job is about as easy as another."

"Did it never occur to you," said Mr. Long, "that in the dealings of Providence with men, something beyond the provision of mere food and raiment was involved. Have your thoughts never reached beyond the question of pork and corn meal?"

"I don't understand you." The carpenter looked slightly bewildered.

"Man has two lives," said Mr. Long: "a life of the body and a life of the mind. To one of these lives has been appointed a comparatively short duration; the other is unending."

The carpenter leaned his head in an attitude of attention; seeing which, Mr. Long continued—

"God is an eternal being; and it is plain, from the fact that he has given to the spirit of man an eternal existence, that he must regard the wants and destiny of the spirit as in every way of primary account, when compared with the wants and destiny of the body. Let this

thought find a distinct resting-place in your mind, neighbour Harding, and then you will begin to have some glimpses of higher truths."

The schoolmaster paused for some moments, in order to let his words make their due impression.

"From which have you suffered most in life?" resumed Mr. Long. "From sickness of the body, or sickness of the mind?"

"Sickness of the mind?" Harding did not clearly apprehend the question; and the schoolmaster modified it thus—

"I should have said, from pain of body, or pain of mind?"

"I've never had much sickness," said Harding, beginning to have a dim perception of the schoolmaster's meaning.

"And yet you have suffered deeply. Mentally—or in your spirit—you were in great pain only a little while ago."

"True, very true." The carpenter spoke partly to himself, as if new thoughts were coming into distinct perception. "Yes, indeed, I have suffered pain of mind. I always suffer pain of mind. As for bodily suffering, I can bear that; but mental suffering drives me, at times, almost beside myself."

"Did you never think of this before?" asked the schoolmaster; "that is, did you never separate so distinctly, in thought, your mind from your body, and see in each a distinct capacity for pleasure and pain?"

"Never. And yet it seems strange how I could have failed to do so."

"If pain of mind is more acute than pain of body," said Mr. Long, "is it not fair to conclude that the mind, or spirit, is capable of far higher pleasures than the body?"

"Yes, I suppose that it is."

"Let us take it for granted—and this is no difficult matter—that God, our Creator, Preserver, and Re-

deemer, is a Being of infinite benevolence—that love is his essential nature: it will follow as a consequence, that he not only desires, but seeks the good of his creatures. You are one of this number; and one toward whom his heart must be moved with pity, for your spirit has suffered much. Thus far in life, you have known little of the true enjoyment that God desires for all the children of men. Vainly have you sought for pleasure in sensual delights: they have proved only serpents to sting you. What a dark, weary way it has been to you!”

“Yes, dark as Egypt at times,” muttered the carpenter.

“Let us go back a little,” said the schoolmaster. “It is plain, that in the way you have been going, matters have not improved much. You are no happier now than you were six months ago.”

“I don’t know about that,” answered Harding. “I don’t know about that. Maybe you may think me foolish, but I can’t help it. Since that strange baby came into our family, I have felt like another man. I don’t know how it is, but the dear little thing has crept right into my heart, and brought with it something of its pure and gentle nature. The truth is, Mr. Long, I’m not the same man I was before Heaven sent that child to my door.”

“Heaven sent it. You have used the right words, neighbour Harding. All good gifts are from Heaven. In love to you, God bestowed this blessing; not to give ease, or comfort, or pleasure to your body, but for the health and joy of your spirit. Ah! I am glad to hear this confession from your lips. And now let me suggest a thought. May not the disappointment you have suffered to-day, and which was for a time so bitter, be productive of higher benefits than any you could have received, had all things gone according to your wishes?”

"I do not see your meaning clearly," said the carpenter.

"Our present conversation would otherwise hardly have occurred," suggested Mr. Long.

"No; I think not."

"Is it not clear, then? Think."

"Perhaps you are right," said Harding, in a thoughtful manner. "You have certainly filled my mind with new ideas. Come over and see me in the evening sometimes, won't you? I'd like to talk with you again of these things. They sound strangely—and yet my mind assents to them as true."

"Nothing is truer," replied the schoolmaster, "than that the eyes of God are over all his works, and that he leadeth his erring creatures by ways that they know not, ever seeking to bring them from the darkness of natural evil into the pure light of his truth. And thus he is seeking to lead you, neighbour Harding. Ah! resist not, but gently yield yourself to the divine guidance. But I have said enough for the present. Yes, I will call over and see you, and if you still find interest in these subjects, we will talk of them again."

What a change had taken place with the carpenter in the brief space of half an hour!—a change from deep agitation of mind, and a paralyzing distrust, to a calm and hopeful spirit. Not to the fact of work having come from an unexpected quarter, was this chiefly to be ascribed. That was but the foundation, so to speak, on which a higher and juster conception of Providence had been erected. His step was firmer, his head more elevated, and his countenance marred by fewer lines of care, as he took his way homeward. No shadow fell across the threshold as he entered; and no heart shrunk with fear at the sound of his voice, that seemed to have found new tones and gentle modulations.

## CHAPTER XII.

THE schoolmaster's words, only dimly apprehended at first, lingered in the mind of Harding; and, as he pondered them, new suggestions came, and new light seemed to break in upon him. There was a higher and better life than the life of the body—wants that no natural sources could supply—sufferings that no earthly physician could alleviate. How clear all this became the longer his mind rested on what his neighbour had said! and he half wondered that, until now, no perception of such important truths had come to him.

Happily, all things at home harmonized with the carpenter's state of mind on that evening. Andrew he found, on his return, busy over his lesson; Lucy had dear little Grace in her arms; and Lotty and Philip, who rarely disagreed if no one interfered with them, were playing together, and singing to themselves as happily as if nothing had ever ruffled the quiet surface of their feelings. The influence of Mr. Long over Andrew, since his particular interest in him had been awakened, and since he had discovered the right avenue by which to reach his feelings, was remarkable. Having secured the good opinion of Mr. Long—to have the good opinion of any one was a new experience for the lad—Andrew was particularly desirous to retain it. A kind look—an approving word—what ample rewards were they for all effort and self-denial! In these he found a pleasure far above any thing that evil indulgence or wrong-doing gave; and, best of all, they left no sad, painful after-consequences.

"That's right, Andrew," said Mr. Harding, ap-

provingly, as he came in and saw how the boy was occupied. "It gives me real pleasure to see you studying your lessons."

What a glow of delight did these words send to the heart of the boy! What a beaming smile irradiated his countenance, as he looked up, gratefully, into his father's face!

Mr. Harding laid his hand gently upon Andrew's head. The act was involuntary, and sprung from a passing mood of gentler feeling. How the touch thrilled along every nerve in the child's being! Memory was at fault in her efforts to recall the time when that hand rested upon him in affectionate approval before. Lower bent his head, and closer to his face was the book lifted. None saw that his eyes were suddenly dimmed, and none but he knew that the page before him was wetted by a tear.

A cry of pleasure from the babe now greeted the ears of Harding; and, in the next moment, Grace was in his arms, and hugged tightly to his heart. At this instant, a shadow fell across the threshold—the twilight was already gathering—and the strange woman, who had visited them a few weeks previously, stood in the door. Her dark, keen eyes took in the whole scene presented to her at a glance.

"Good evening, friends," she said, half familiarly, half respectfully; and, without invitation, she entered.

"Good evening, madam," returned Harding, approaching her by a step or two. Grace had laid her head close against his breast, and was nestling there with a happy, confiding look on her sweet young face.

"Will you take a chair, madam?"

The chair was proffered and accepted. At the same time, the woman laid off her bonnet.

"You were so kind at my last visit, that I hardly feel like a stranger," said she, as she adjusted her cap, and



pushed back under it a portion of her black hair, in which gray lines were visible.

"That dear babe, again," she added, as she fixed her eyes intently on Grace. "I never saw a lovelier creature."

Mrs. Harding entered, at this moment, from the kitchen, where she had been preparing supper. At sight of the woman, she started, and looked disturbed.

"Good evening, ma'am."

The stranger fixed her eyes penetratingly upon her.

"Good evening," was coldly replied.

"In passing this way again, I could not resist the inclination to call, if for no other reason than to thank you for your former kindness, and to apologize for my abrupt departure. It was necessary for me to be at Beechwood at a very early hour, and I did not wish to disturb you, or tax your hospitality for an early breakfast."

The blandness and easy self-possession with which this was said, in a measure overcame the instinctive repugnance of Mrs. Harding. Still, she did not like the woman, and felt ill at ease in her presence. With as good a grace as possible, she bade her welcome. From the woman's manner, it was evidently her intention to remain to supper, and, in all probability, through the night. Indeed, she soon intimated this to the carpenter and his wife, who could do no less than invite her to remain with as much show of cordiality as possible. The object of her visit was matter of little question to them. Too distinct was their remembrance of her conduct on a previous occasion—and of the intimations then given by her—to leave any room to doubt that she had a personal interest in Grace, and now came solely on this account.

All eye and all ear was the stranger to every thing that passed in the family of Jacob Harding. The carpenter's face she scanned with so close a scrutiny, that

he often found his eyes drooping beneath the singular gaze that was fixed upon him. The movements of Mrs. Harding were also closely observed, and not a word passed between the children that she did not weigh its meaning.

Whether it were from the presence of this dignified stranger, or from the subduing effects of better states of mind, the children were unusually well-behaved and orderly during supper-time. Lucy proposed to wait and be the nurse of Grace during the meal; although her mother said that she could hold the babe and attend the table well enough.

After supper, the woman succeeded, after many ineffectual attempts, in alluring Grace from Mr. Harding. The little one looked half frightened as she passed to the arms of the stranger, and then immediately reached out her hands to go back. But, being retained, her lips began to curve, and a low murmur of fear was audible.

"Come back, then, darling!" said the carpenter, lovingly; and he took her from the woman almost by force. What a happy change was seen instantly in the sweet young face, and with what a manifest joy did the little one shrink to the manly breast, and cling there as if it had found a home of safety!

"You love that child?" said the woman. Her tones were grave, and her proud lips firm.

"Yes; better than any thing in this world."

"It is not your own child?" added the woman.

"It is mine by the gift of God," said the carpenter, with a depth of feeling in his voice that surprised his auditor. "Some one—I do not think she is worthy the name of woman—deserted it at our door."

The woman moved uneasily, and partly averted her face.

"Abandoned," continued the carpenter, "by her to whom God had given a precious gift, the guardianship

was transferred to us. We have accepted it gladly—thankfully. And who will now *dare* say the child is not ours? Such words must not be spoken here!”

The natural warmth of Harding’s temperament betrayed him into an indignant vehemence, which caused the woman to shrink back from him a little way, and to look surprised, almost fearful.

“We cannot hear such words spoken,” repeated the carpenter, in a gentler voice. “God sent an angel to our household when he sent this babe; and we have made room for her—room for her in our home, and room for her in our hearts.”

The woman sat for some time with her eyes upon the floor. She was evidently in deep thought.

“Rather say”—thus she spoke in a low voice—“that God *lent* her to you—lent her, it may be, only for a little while. It is not well to fix the heart too idolizingly upon a child. What if her real mother were to come and claim her at your hands?”

“There is her *true* mother,” said the carpenter, firmly, and he pointed toward his wife. “A woman gave her life, but *she* gave her *love*—a mother’s love. Her *real* mother! Madam! I would spurn from the door the wretch who dared say that she brought into existence this sweet young cherub, and then abandoned her to perish, or, mayhap, find an unwelcome home among strangers.”

“Can an evil tree produce good fruit?” asked the woman, looking at the excited carpenter almost sternly.

“It is said not,” he replied.

“Could an evil-hearted mother give birth to so angelic a babe? Think, Mr. Harding.”

“Could a good-hearted woman abandon her nursing infant? Think, madam.”

The woman’s glance cowered beneath the steady eyes of the carpenter.

"Can a sweet fountain send forth bitter waters?" The man spoke half to himself. "No—no—no."

"State the case as you will," said the woman, "and the difficulty is the same. Here is a babe in which all goodness seems concentrated—I cannot believe, nor can you, that the mother who gave it birth was all evil."

"Why did she abandon it?" replied the carpenter.

"Ah! there lies the question. Do you know?"

"You need not ask."

"She may not have acted freely. There may have been an array of circumstances that crushed out, for a time, her true life. I can more easily believe this, than that her heart was all evil. The baby in your arms contradicts that assumption."

"Mercy!"

This was the startled exclamation of Mrs. Harding, as she arose quickly to her feet. Her eyes were fixed on the door, which had swung slowly open. Every glance followed her own. A beautiful young woman, with face as white as marble, stood there, motionless—statue-like. That face the carpenter's wife remembered but too well. She had seen it once before, as it stood out on the background of darkness, and every feature was daguerreotyped on her memory.

"Edith! You here! What madness! Go! go!"

The woman started up, and raising both hands, motioned her energetically to be gone.

"Baby! baby! Oh, my sweet baby!"

And the young creature bounded forward. Ere the bewildered carpenter had time to recover his self-possession, she had lifted Grace from his arms, and was hugging her wildly to her heart.

"Oh baby! Grace! Darling!" What a passionate tenderness was in her voice! "I was wicked, wicked, wicked to give you up! But you are once more against

my heart, and we will live or die together! Baby! Sweet one! Oh! darling! darling!"

She had moved about the room like one half crazed; but now, as a shower of tears fell over her face, she dropped into a chair, and leaning over the child, which she held close to her bosom, she mingled kisses, sobs, and tears, for some minutes, in a very tempest of emotion.

Meantime, the elder of the two women showed strong agitation, that was repressed only by a vigorous effort. Now her face was dark with struggling passion; and now so pale and ghastly, that it seemed as if her very life's love were suffering its final assault. As soon as the first bewildering excitement was over, she went up to the young woman, and laying her hand upon her with a firm grasp, said, in a tone of remonstrance—

"What madness has come over you, Edith? Give back the child, and come away. It is as well cared for as you or I could desire."

The other waved her hand with an imperative gesture as she replied—

"It is useless, mother! My resolve is taken. I will not part with my child. Mine it is—mine, born in lawful wedlock, and there is no earthly power strong enough to drag it from my arms. You may turn from me, if you will. You may shut up your heart against me; but mine shall be open to my child—my darling, darling child! Sweet, sweet baby!"

And she again hugged it to her heart.

"The fountain is not dry yet, love," she murmured, in a low, tender voice, as she bared her bosom, and drew the babe's soft face against it. "Drink again—drink! I have kept it open for this hour—this hour that my heart told me would come—must come. There—there. Drink, baby—drink. Drink, and God bless you!"

And as the babe commenced drawing sweet life from

this fountain of life, the mother's eyes were lifted heavenward. Her cheeks glowed, and a thrill of exquisite joy trembled along every fibre of her soul.

"Father," she sobbed, "let my tears and thankfulness for this hour of restoration, obliterate the record that darkens one page of my life's sad history."

This scene was more than the woman she called her mother could witness unsubdued. Hitherto her imperious will had ruled her complying child. But nature—free nature—had now asserted her right, and swept aside all opposing forces. In Edith's heart, the mother's love was stronger than the daughter's fear.

"Edith, what am I to understand by all this?" said the woman, speaking with a resolute calmness.

"That I am ready to give up all for my child."

"Give up me?"

The woman held her breath for an answer. Edith did not reply, but bent lower over her babe, and drew it closer to her heart.

"Give up me?" repeated the woman.

"Mother! As God liveth, I will keep this child. If you turn from me—if you cast me off—well; but, as God liveth, I will keep my child!"

For a little while the frame of the other quivered, as if attacked by a sudden ague fit. Then stepping back a pace or two, she stood a few moments irresolute. The door of the adjoining room was partly open. Into this she now passed with a quick movement. A struggle had commenced that she wished to sustain all apart from observation. Nearly ten minutes elapsed before her reappearance. Scarcely a change of position or relation had occurred during her brief absence. Her face was very calm, her step deliberate, and her manner self-possessed, like one who has passed from doubtful questionings to a certainty.

Going up to her daughter, she laid her hand again upon her, saying, as she did so—

“Edith, my child!”

The voice was low, calm, and even tender.

“Mother!”

It was the bowed creature’s simple response. She did not look up.

“Edith, I may have erred—I know not. If so, it has been for your sake. Love and pride have both been strong. But we will contend no longer. In the future, your own heart must lead you: I will oppose nothing.”

An electric thrill seemed suddenly to awaken the half-dormant sensibilities of the young mother. She looked up with a blending of joy and surprise in her countenance.

“What do I hear? Speak the words again.”

“We will contend no longer, Edith. In the future, your own heart must lead you: I will oppose nothing.”

The eyes of Edith closed as she leaned her head back against her mother, whose arm now clasped her. How placid was her pale young face!—how soft, and tender, and loving the sweet lips just parting with a smile!

“You have made me happy. Can a mother ask more for her child?”

It was all she said; but the words went trembling down into the agitated heart of that strong, self-willed woman of the world, and accomplished their mission.

A kiss—long and fervent—sealed the reconciliation and new compact.



## CHAPTER XIII.

WHILE this scene was passing, little Lotty had crept into her mother's lap, and was lying with her head close against her bosom. Since Grace came among them, Lotty had found a new pleasure. She never tired of being with the babe, and the babe never seemed happier than when Lotty was bending over her, and talking to her in a language that only they understood.

"Is she going to take Grace away from us?" she whispered two or three times to her mother, as she looked on wonderingly, yet with an instinct of the truth.

Mrs. Harding did not reply, for she could not; but, at each renewal of the question, her arm drew, with an involuntary pressure, the little one closer to her breast.

"I'll be your little Grace, mother."

These words, so unexpected, thrilled a new chord in her heart.

"Grace is so sweet and so good," she answered, more from impulse than thought. The words were scarcely uttered, ere she felt that they were spoken unwisely.

"I will try to be good."

There was a pleading softness in Lotty's tones that touched the mother's sensibilities. She was asking for a love, deeper, purer, truer than she had ever known—such a love as she had seen given to another.

"I will try to be good, mother. I will try to be like Grace. But they won't take her away, will they, mother?"

"I hope not, dear."

"If they do, mother, shan't I be your little Grace?"

"Yes, if you will be good, like Grace."

"I can't be good just like her. But I'll try, mother. And you won't scold me so, will you, mother? Talk to me sweet and good, just as you talk to Grace—won't you, mother?"

And now the child's arms were stealing around the neck of Mrs. Harding, and her eyes were looking up into her face, pleading and filled with tears.

What language could have been more rebuking, more softening, more subduing? It penetrated to the very inmost of her consciousness. Her only answer was a strong embrace. How her heart enlarged toward Lotty!

"You will love me, mother, if I'm good?"

The child was not satisfied with mere dumb show.

"Oh yes, my dear one!" answered Mrs. Harding, in a voice whose tenderness satisfied the heart of Lotty. "I will love you. Be a good little girl, and I will love you just as well as I love Grace."

"I will be so good, mother," murmured the happy little one, as she hid her face, and wept for very joy.

Thus she was lying, when the elder of the two strangers, turning from her daughter, between whom and herself so singular a reconciliation had taken place, said, addressing Mr. Harding in a calm voice—

"My friend, there was a meaning in the words I spoke a little while ago, that went beyond my own thoughts. This young woman—the mother of Grace—is my child. I did not expect her here this evening—nothing could have been farther from my anticipations. I knew that she was almost dying to see her child—to have it again in her arms, and I feared that its restoration might become necessary. Why she abandoned it at your door, cannot now be explained; neither can we reveal who we are, or where we came from. That secret, for the present, must remain with ourselves. Enough, that the child is ours, and now returns to its true home

and its true mother. You and your excellent wife will never be forgotten. My daughter has a heart that can feel gratitude—bad as you have pronounced her—and this you will, ere long, know. Let me ask of you one thing, and that is, silence as to the occurrences of this evening.”

The carpenter sat with his eyes upon the floor, during all the time that the woman was speaking.

As she ceased, he arose, and crossing the room, stood before the young woman, who still held Grace in her arms.

Reaching out his hands, and smiling, he said, in a voice of tender persuasion—

“Come, Grace—come, love—come.”

The little one lifted her head from the woman’s breast, bent toward the carpenter, and smiled, in return, one of her sweetest, most loving smiles. The woman instantly drew the child back, while a shade of fear went over her countenance.

“Don’t be alarmed, madam,” said the carpenter, in a respectful voice. “If she will come, let her come. You may take her again. Grace, darling! Sweet one! Come!”

Again the babe raised herself up, and leaned toward the carpenter. Again she smiled sweetly, fluttered her tiny hands, and seemed anxious to get into his arms. He reached out for her; but just as she seemed ready to spring to him, her eyes wandered up to the loving face, so full of unutterable tenderness, that bent over her; and then she fell back upon the bosom she knew to be her mother’s.

A shadow darkened on the carpenter’s face.

“Come, darling!” he repeated, extending his hands.

She lifted her head again, stretched out her arms, and in the next instant was tightly clasped to the carpenter’s bosom.

"Heaven bless you, sweet one! Bless you! bless you! An angel of love you have been to us all! How can we give you up? Oh! no, no! It must not be! God gave you to us; and shall we let any but the death-angel take you away?"

The mother had started to her feet, and was now moving by the side of Harding, as he paced about the room, her face full of alarm and anxiety.

"Oh, sir! give me back my babe!" she cried, in a voice of deep supplication. "Grace! Darling! Come to your mother!"

Harding paused, and, by an effort, repressed the strong upheaving of emotion. As he relaxed the tight clasp of his arms, the little one raised her head, and now reached out her hands toward her mother.

"Go back, then," he said, kissing her tenderly. "Go back. I cannot say nay, if it is in both your hearts."

As Grace returned, with a baby murmur of joy, to her mother's arms, the carpenter's strength seemed to leave him, and he sunk into a chair, where for some time he remained, with his head drooped upon his breast. From this state he was aroused by hearing the elder of the two women say, addressing her daughter—

"You came in the carriage?"

"Yes."

"How far is it away?"

"About a quarter of a mile, on the road to Beechwood."

"It is growing late. We must leave here."

"You will not leave to-night?" said Harding, as he arose and came forward.

"Oh yes; we must go," was answered.

"To that I cannot consent"—the carpenter spoke firmly—"unless you go alone."

"Alone!"

The mother of Grace looked frightened.

"Yes—alone. Did you think, for an instant, that I would stand passive and see her taken away by strangers, no matter what their claim? If so, you have mistaken Jacob Harding. Who are you? Where do you live? These are questions that must be fully answered."

There was a manly dignity about the carpenter that compelled respect, and a firmness of manner that showed him to be entirely in earnest.

The two women looked at each other with troubled glances.

"You shall know all in good time," said the elder.

"Now is the good time," was answered. "Believe me, when I say, that I love that babe too well, to trust her even with her mother, when all the past is considered, unless I know where to find that mother. I must hold you both to a higher responsibility than your own consciences."

"What is to be done?" almost sobbed the distressed young woman. "Oh that I were once more at home with my babe! Kind sir"—and she turned to the carpenter with a pleading look—"do let us go. I have the means of being generous to you, and I will be generous. Gratitude for your kindness to my child has already suggested ample benefits. Oh, sir! withdraw your opposition. There are reasons why we desire to remain for the present unknown. Say that we may leave, and I will never cease to ask for you Heaven's choicest blessings."

"It cannot be," said the carpenter, with unwavering firmness. "That child never leaves here unless I know all about those who take her away. Rely upon it, nothing will turn me from this purpose."

The two women now communed with each other, apart, for some minutes. The elder then approached Harding, and said—

"My name is Hartley; and I live in Overton."

There was an unsteadiness of voice and eye as she spoke, that did not escape the carpenter's notice.

"It will not do," replied Harding, shaking his head.

"What *will* do, then?" exclaimed the woman, in a quick, demanding voice.

Her whole manner changed. The fretted will, so used to reaching its purposes in spite of all hinderances, could tamely brook this opposition no longer.

Five times did Jacob Harding pace the room backward and forward before answering. Then pausing before the woman, who had remained standing, he said—

"One thing I have fully decided."

"What?"

The woman spoke eagerly.

"That Grace does not leave here to-night."

"Oh sir, don't say that!" cried the younger of the two strangers. Her pale face blanched whiter.

"I have said it, and will not change," answered the carpenter. "You can both remain if you will. We will give you the best accommodations our poor abode can offer. As for me, I want time to consider this matter. It is far too weighty to receive a hurried decision. I must have a night's sleep upon it."

"Oh, for patience!" exclaimed the elder of the women. "You may repent this, sir! You know not whose will you are thwarting."

"I confess my ignorance," said Harding, with a shade of irony in his voice; "and therefore it is that I hesitate, and choose to act with circumspection."

"We cannot remain here to-night. Impossible!"

"Very well. You will find us all here to-morrow, or the day after."

Seeing that Harding was not to be moved, the two women drew together in a distant part of the room, and remained in whispered conversation for a long time.

"My daughter cannot be induced to leave her child,"

said the mother, as she left Edith, and came forward to where Harding was now seated by his wife. "She will, therefore, remain, at least, until to-morrow. Then, I trust, you will permit her to depart with her babe. Further hinderance on your part will be cruelty. Think of what she has already suffered, and spare her further anguish. As for me, I will go to-night."

"You are welcome to stay, if it so please you," returned the carpenter.

"My daughter's health has been feeble for some time," said the woman, "and she is now quite overcome by fatigue and excitement. If you will let her retire early, she will take it as a kindness."

Mrs. Harding arose at this time, and laying the now sleeping Lotty in her father's arms, passed from the room. In a few minutes she returned, and said the chamber was ready, if the lady wished to retire. The mother and her daughter went in together, and shut the door behind them. Mrs. Harding intended to enter the room also, but the door closed so quickly, that she was left without. For a moment or two she stood confused and undecided. Then turning to her husband, she said—

"Jacob, what is to be done? How can we give her up?"

"We will not, unless we know more of these persons than we now do," replied Harding.

"It is her mother," said Mrs. Harding.

"Yes; that is plain. But who and what is she?"

"If we only knew."

"We must know." Harding spoke firmly. "Not until I have the fullest intelligence in regard to them, will I consent to let them have the child. Hark! what is that?"

The carpenter listened.

"What do you hear?"



Mrs. Harding was startled by her husband's manner.

"I thought I heard a noise."

"What was it like?"

"I don't know."

Both listened for some moments.

"Where was it?"

"I can't tell whether it was in the house or out doors.

It was nothing, probably. I'm excited."

Still they listened in a kind of breathless suspense.

"I wonder if they have fastened that door: they are very still," said the carpenter.

Mrs. Harding stepped lightly to the door, and tried the lock.

"It is fastened," she whispered back.

"They must have turned the bolt very silently," remarked Harding. "Suppose you knock, and ask if they want any thing."

Mrs. Harding tapped gently. There was no answer. She tapped again, but louder. Still all remained silent within. She now rattled the lock, and called to the inmates. The answer was fruitless: no answer to her summons was returned.

"I don't like this," said Harding, starting up, and advancing to the door, against which he threw his body with a force that broke the fastenings within. As the door swung open, his eyes rested upon the open window. In an instant, all was comprehended. Flinging the sleeping child he held in his arms upon the untumbled bed, he sprung through the open window, and disappeared in the darkness.

"A quarter of a mile from here, on the road to Beechwood." He remembered these words, and ran swiftly in that direction, hoping to overtake the fugitives. The sky was overclouded, and the night intensely dark. In vain the eye sought to penetrate the thick vail of shadows. For more than half a mile, Harding pursued his

way toward Beechwood, and then stopped, with a heart-sickening consciousness that longer search in that direction was hopeless. Returning with rapid steps, he swept around in a wide circle, vainly seeking for the two women who had disappeared so noiselessly, taking with them the dear angel of the household. But all was of no avail. Under cover of the darkness, they had effected their escape. After an hour spent in fruitless search, he came back, looking pale and distressed. To the eager questionings of his tearful wife, he only answered—

“Gone! gone! and not a trace of them left behind!” dropping into a chair as he spoke, and trembling from exhaustion of body and mind.

“Oh, Jacob! Jacob!” It was all the heart-stricken wife could say, as she leaned over him, and wept bitterly.

“Mary,” said the carpenter, after he had grown calmer, “I have never had any thing to hurt me like this. It seems almost as if a hand were grasping my heart, and striving to tear it from my breast. Dear baby! And to lose her thus! I cannot bear it, Mary!”

“If we only knew where she was; if we could go to her sometimes,” sobbed Mrs. Harding.

“If she had died and passed up into heaven,” said the carpenter. “But to be stolen from us, and taken, we know not where, perhaps to be abandoned again, and to suffer, who can tell, what cruel treatment! Oh! the thought drives me half distracted.”

“I do not think, Jacob, that her mother will part with her again. She loves her child too deeply. My heart ached, as I looked at her, to think of what she must have borne since she tore it from her bosom, and left it at our door. I wonder that she was not bereft of reason. For her sake, I will try to bear the pain I feel. Oh! if I only *knew* that all would be well with the babe.”

“That I must know, Mary,” replied the carpenter,

with regained firmness. "The woman said her name was Hartley, and that they lived at Overton. This may be true or false; but to Overton I will go early in the morning. If the statement prove false, so much is settled, and I can turn with more confidence my eyes in another direction. Of one thing I am certain—they do not live very far from Beechwood."

As best they could, the carpenter and his wife sought to console each other, and, in the act, drew closer together in heart, and felt a mutual sympathy. How deserted the house seemed to them! and their chamber, when they retired for the night, felt lonely and cheerless. If the baby had died, and, a little while before, been carried forth from that room to its mortal resting-place, the feeling of sadness and desolation that oppressed them could not have been stronger. Sleep did not visit their pillows early. They were kept awake by thoughts of the sweet babe that had so grown into their hearts, that it seemed a part of their life. But, at last, their heavy eyelids closed, and then this dream came to Mrs. Harding:—

She was sitting in her own chamber, with an infant lying close against her bosom. It had soft, brown, silken hair, curling in glossy circles about its forehead and temples, and eyes down into whose blue depths she gazed until it seemed that heaven was opening to her vision. It was not Grace—not the angel babe whose coming and going were shrouded in mystery—but a new gift to her mother's heart. Full of love and joy she bent over the lovely innocent, while her spirit uplifted itself in thankfulness for a boon so precious. As she sat thus, a pale, sweet-faced woman entered, also clasping an infant in her arms. She knew them both at a glance—the mother of Grace, with her newly-regained treasure in her arms. Coming up slowly to Mrs. Harding, she stood, for some moments, gazing upon her

with a tender smile. Then her lips parted with the words—

“Our household angels!”

A thrill of such exquisite pleasure went through the sleeper's mind, that she awoke. Lotty was in her arms, and she drew her to her heart with a feeling of maternal tenderness deeper than she had ever known for her child.

“I'll be your little Grace, mother.”

The words seemed spoken in her ears again, and she raised herself up to see if Lotty were not really waking. But no: Lotty was in the world of dreams.

“Bless you, my baby!” murmured Mrs. Harding, as she laid her lips against the warm cheek of the sleeper. “You shall be my little Grace.”

“Dear mother! I will be good if you will love me.”

She was dreaming.

Gathering her little one closer in her arms, Mrs. Harding lifted her voice to heaven, and prayed that she might be to her children a true mother. And her prayer, rising from an earnest, yearning heart, did not return to her fruitless.

## CHAPTER XIV.

"QUICK!" ejaculated the elder of the two women, as she closed the door of the little chamber into which the carpenter's wife had shown them, and slipped the bolt silently. Gliding past her half-bewildered daughter, she raised the window, which opened only a few feet from the ground, and springing out with the agility of a girl, was ready to help Edith through the narrow way of egress they had chosen.

"Quick! quick! Step lightly."

And the mother drew her arm around the slender form of Edith, and bore her onward as if she had been only a child. Sweeping around the house, the two women gained the road that passed only at a short distance from the door, and then pressed forward, as fast as the darkness would permit, in the direction of Beechwood. They were only a short distance away from the carpenter's dwelling, when the young woman said, in a voice of alarm—

"Hark! What is that?"

Both paused to listen, and instantly became aware, by the sound of swiftly approaching footsteps, that they were pursued.

"O mother! what shall we do?" said Edith, in a frightened voice.

Her companion answered not, but passing an arm around her waist, drew her off from the road to a clump of bushes that opportunely offered a place of concealment. Behind this they crouched just in time to hide their figures, which, from portions of white in their garments, would, in all probability, have attracted the eyes of

Harding, whom they doubted not to be the individual approaching with such hasty speed. He passed within only a few feet of them—so near, that his muttered words reached their ears.

"Come," said the elder of the women, as soon as Harding's heavy footsteps sounded faint in the distance.

"Not that way," objected her daughter.

"Why not?" was sharply inquired.

"He has just passed."

"Is not the carriage in this direction?"

"Yes."

"Concealed in the woods?"

"Yes."

"He will not find it, but we must. Come! In this deep darkness lies our safety. Here—give me the child."

"No—no."

And Edith resisted the attempts of her mother to get possession of Grace.

"Why don't you give her to me? Foolish girl! I am stronger than you," said the woman.

"She is as light as a feather in my arms," replied Edith, who still kept hold of the babe. "You lead the way, and I will follow as fast as you desire."

The woman, with a slight murmur of impatience, gave up the brief contest, and moved on again in the direction taken by the carpenter, her daughter following close in her footsteps. Stopping every little while to listen, and then pressing on, the two fugitives continued their way for about ten minutes, when Edith said—

"This is the place, mother. I told Mark to wait for me in the woods, off to the left."

Leaving the road, the two women sought for the carriage, but, to their dismay, it was nowhere to be found.

"Are you certain about the place, Edith?"

Edith was very certain in the beginning, but the

darkness was so bewildering, that her mind began to waver.

"I think it was here, mother."

"O Edith! and so much at stake!" exclaimed her companion, rebukingly. "When will you learn to rightly guard the future?"

"The darkness is so deep," said Edith.

"You should have thought of that, and taken a closer observation. What are we to do?"

"Mark!" called Edith.

"Hush! Mad girl! Your voice may reach other ears than his."

"Listen!" Edith spoke in a quick, eager tone.

"What is that?"

"It is the carriage, thank God!"

And the excited young creature leaned her head against her mother, and sobbed violently. Her voice had reached the coachman, who was only a short distance from where they were standing, and his horses were in motion. But a few moments elapsed before the two women were in the carriage.

"Home, Mark—home!" whispered the mother, "and as swift as our horses' feet will take us."

"It is very dark, ma'am," answered the coachman.

"You know the road, Mark," was the brief and significant answer.

For a few minutes the carriage crept along almost noiselessly, until the road was fairly gained; then, at a word from Mark, the horses sprung away at a speed that satisfied even the impatient riders.

For nearly two hours this speed was maintained, and then the foaming horses were turned into a wooded lane that wound up to a fine old mansion, around which clustered many evidences of wealth, taste, and aristocratic pride. Into this the two women passed, and here, for the present, we will leave them.



The morning that broke after that eventful night, found Mr. and Mrs. Harding in trouble, grief, and great perplexity of mind. A tearful vail was over their whole household. Not one of the inmates but grieved after dear little Grace, with a sorrow that knew no words of comfort—no ray of consolation. All questioned, but there was none who could answer.

“What shall we do?”

That was the doubtful inquiry of the carpenter and his wife, asked often of each other, and answered only by troubled looks.

“Shall we at once make it known to the neighbourhood?” asked Harding. “This it is necessary for us speedily to determine. The child will be missed, sooner or later, when we shall have to account satisfactorily for its absence.”

“Suppose you see Mr. Long, and ask his advice,” said Mrs. Harding. “He is a good man, and discreet.”

“Well suggested, Mary,” said the carpenter. “I will see him without a moment’s delay.”

But even the schoolmaster failed to see the matter clearly on its first presentation. To bruit the whole thing abroad, might prove a serious error; but, in what way, a total ignorance of the parties concerned left altogether in doubt. It was plain that they had acted with a desperation which only the gravest considerations could justify. The crime of having abandoned an infant involved the deepest disgrace, and it was no cause of wonder that they sought to escape the penalty. On the other hand, the absence of the babe from the family of Harding would not fail to attract attention, and the neighbours would have a clear right to demand an explanation of the fact.

“What had we best do, Mr. Long?”

This was the earnest question of Harding, at the conclusion of his conference with the schoolmaster.

"Say nothing to any one else, at least for to-day," was the answer. "I will testify, if necessary, to the fact that you came to me, and related the whole of the strange circumstance, and that I advised you to keep silent for a day or two, while you made earnest search for the parties who carried off the child. My word, I am sure, will be all that is needed to screen you from suspicion of wrong."

"I am very sure of that, Mr. Long, and will do as you suggest," replied the carpenter. "And now, my first search must be made in the neighbourhood of Overton, although I have little hope of finding them there. I saw deception in the woman's unsteady eyes, when she mentioned this as her place of residence. One step brings us to the point from which the next can be taken. I will regard this as the first step in a search that must not be fruitless."

"And it will not be fruitless, I trust," said the schoolmaster, as Harding turned from him, and went back home to advise his wife of the conclusion to which he had arrived, after consulting with Mr. Long.

Mounted on a good horse, the carpenter was soon on his way to Overton, a small town some two miles beyond Beechwood. A widow lady, with whom he had some acquaintance, resided there, and at her house he alighted on reaching the village. After the customary greetings, and brief questions about family matters, Harding said—

"Do you know a lady, in Overton, by the name of Hartley?"

"Oh yes! very well," was the answer.

With what a strong throb did the heart of the carpenter bound at this reply, so little expected!

"Is she an elderly lady?" he next inquired.

"She is past the middle age; yet no one would call her old."

"Where does she live?"

The woman took him to the door, and pointed to a fine old mansion, almost hidden by majestic elms, that stood not far from her dwelling.

"Has she a daughter?"

"Yes; an only daughter."

"Grown up?"

"Yes."

"The person I wish to see," said the carpenter; "and as my business is somewhat urgent, I must bid you good morning."

Turning almost abruptly from the woman, he sprung into his saddle, and galloped away in the direction of Mrs. Hartley's, his mind already strongly excited in anticipation of an interview, the termination of which involved so much, and was yet so full of uncertainty. Passing from the public road into a gravelled lane, lined on each side by tastefully cut cedars, he advanced toward a beautiful dwelling, around which was every thing to indicate the possession of a cultivated taste by the owner, and wealth for its gratification. But at these external beauties he scarcely glanced. Too deeply was he absorbed by thoughts of the approaching interview.

Dismounting and fastening his horse, Harding advanced to the hall-door, and lifting the heavy knocker, brought it down with a strong hand. The sound reverberated loudly within. In a few moments, a servant answered his summons.

"Is Mrs. Hartley at home?" asked the carpenter. The suspense from which he was now suffering made his voice falter.

"She is," was the quiet answer.

"Can I see her?"

"Will you walk in?" said the servant, politely.

The carpenter entered, and was shown into one of the elegantly furnished parlours.

"What name shall I say?"

Harding was about to give a wrong name, but his quickened moral sense instantly objected, and he said—

“No matter. Say that I wish particularly to see her.”

The servant hesitated for a few moments, and then left the apartment. Soon the rustle of a lady's garments was heard on the stairs. Harding arose to his feet, involuntarily, and stood almost holding his breath. A tall, dignified, middle-aged woman, with a mild countenance, presented herself. It was not her of whom the excited man was in search. The lady bowed, as she entered, and said—

“My name is Mrs. Hartley.”

“Not the Mrs. Hartley I wish to see,” replied the carpenter, in a tone that betrayed the depth of his disappointment.

“I know no other by my name,” the lady answered. “You seem to be under some mistake, sir. Perhaps, if you explain yourself, I may be able to set you right. Will you not be seated?”

As Harding resumed his chair, he said—

“A woman was at my house last night—it is the second time she has called there—who told me that she lived in Overton, and that her name was Mrs. Hartley.”

“Ah!” The lady was surprised. “What kind of a looking woman was she?”

“In person, near your size, and, to all appearance, near your age.”

The lady's face flushed.

“Near my size and age?”

“Yes, ma'am; but, in countenance, you bear no resemblance,” said the carpenter.

“And she said her name was Hartley, and that she resided at Overton?”

“She did; but I questioned, in my own mind, her truthfulness at the time. Ah! how cruelly have I been deceived!”

"Deceived! In what way, sir?" asked the lady.

"Pardon me," said the carpenter, "if I decline an explanation: the reasons are imperative."

"You are the best judge of that. And yet, as my name has been used in so strange a manner, it seems only right that I should be made acquainted, at least in some degree, with the occasion of such an unwarrantable liberty. Can you describe the woman to me?"

Harding gave as accurate a description as possible of the person of whom he was in search.

"Did you observe a mole on her right cheek?" asked the lady.

"Oh yes, madam! I remember that distinctly," said the carpenter, starting to his feet. "Tell me! Do you know her?"

"And she said her name was Hartley?"

"Yes."

"And that she lived at Overton?"

"Her words, as my visit here attests."

"A very singular statement," said the lady.

"Oh, madam! tell me if you know her: do not keep me in suspense," urged the carpenter, growing more excited.

"I cannot imagine the reason of such singular conduct." The lady spoke to herself. "Gave her name as Mrs. Hartley! What does it mean? There is some mystery here," she added, addressing the carpenter; "and as my name has become connected with it, I have a right to ask for explanation. For what purpose did this woman come to your house?"

"From the description I have given, do you identify her?" asked Harding.

"I do, clearly."

The carpenter struck his hands together, exclaiming—

"So much gained! so much gained! Oh, madam! tell me where I can find her!"

"Not unless I know why you are in search of her. If you will not trust me, neither will I trust you," replied the lady, firmly.

Deeply perplexed was the carpenter again. He saw that the woman was right; and yet he was as much in doubt respecting her, as she was respecting him. It was plain that she knew the persons who had carried off the child; but what good or evil might flow from a revelation of the strange facts connected with them, she was unable to divine.

"Does she live in Overton?" he asked, hoping to gain some admission.

"I shall communicate nothing," said Mrs. Hartley, "unless I know the ground of your inquiries. If, as I said before, you will not trust me, I will not trust you."

"We never know how far it is safe to trust an entire stranger," remarked Harding.

"Very true; and that is my reason for not giving information to a stranger, of whose object I am entirely ignorant."

"Will you answer me these questions?" The carpenter spoke in an anxious tone. "Is the lady in good social standing? And is she known as virtuous and honourable?"

"I can answer you freely. She is in good standing, and I have never heard any thing against her of so grave a nature as this that you now allege—the assumption of my name. This, sir, is a most serious allegation. The wherefore must involve something more serious still."

"That it certainly does," said the carpenter. "And this being so, it is but just toward her that I should keep my own counsel until I see her face to face. That she desires secrecy, is apparent in the fact, that she has misled me by assuming a name that belongs to another. Ah, madam! if you would only give me the information I seek!"

The lady mused for some time; then, shaking her head, she answered—

“I cannot meet your wishes.”

Harding sighed deeply. Rising, he moved toward the door of the apartment, his face strongly marked by disappointment.

“May I ask your address?” said Mrs. Hartley.

It was given without hesitation.

“Your errand here this morning is a very singular one, Mr. Harding,” remarked the lady, evidently unwilling to have him depart, without some disclosure of facts about which her curiosity was in no small degree excited. “Is it not possible for us so far to trust each other, as to impart the information each desires?”

“Not at present, I fear,” answered the carpenter. “Too many grave considerations force themselves upon my mind, and enjoin circumspection. But of one thing I can assure you: I shall not long remain in this suspense. Should the search of to-day not prove successful, you will see me in the morning—perhaps this evening, when, to gain the information I desire, I will disclose what now discretion warns me to conceal.”

Bowing to the lady, who made no further effort to detain him, Harding withdrew, and, mounting his horse, rode off at a quick pace. It was not his purpose, now, to make further search in this direction. First, he wished to consult with Mr. Long, and get his advice as to the propriety of disclosing to Mrs. Hartley the facts of the previous evening, in order to get the information so much desired. And so, turning his horse's head homeward, he pressed the animal to his utmost speed.



## CHAPTER XV.

IMMEDIATELY on his return from Overton, the carpenter went to see Mr. Long.

"One step taken in the right direction," said the schoolmaster, after Harding had finished his narration of what passed between him and Mrs. Hartley.

"But what of the next?" asked Harding. "That is the question I am unable to answer. A wrong step may involve most serious consequences. The parties in this strange and disgraceful business evidently occupy a high social position, and are exceedingly anxious to remain unknown. If I reveal all to Mrs. Hartley, in order to gain the information I seek, it may be the cause of an irreparable injury. The mother of Grace has, it is plain, acted under an influence from her imperious mother that she was unable to resist; and the latter, moved by family pride, or some other strong consideration, has taken an extreme step, the knowledge of which, if it get on the wings of common report, must ruin her in the good opinion of every one."

"It is but just," remarked the schoolmaster, "to weigh every thing with the nicest care, where so much is involved. I think you were altogether right in withholding from Mrs. Hartley the information she asked, and I cannot blame her for being equally discreet."

"But what step can next be taken? I have not a single clue by which to trace out the fugitives. They escaped in the darkness, and left no sign of their departure."

"Did not the young woman say something about her carriage being near at hand, on the road to Beechwood?"

"Yes. She said it was a quarter of a mile away."

"It might be worth your while," said the schoolmaster, "to examine the ground, a little off from the road, and see if you can find the mark of wheels. The carriage, most probably, was withdrawn from the public way, in order to escape observation."

"Of what use will it be?" said the carpenter.

"Possibly, the direction taken may be ascertained."

Harding shook his head doubtfully.

"Very small indications are sufficient often to lead to important results," remarked the schoolmaster. "When we are altogether in the dark, we accept the feeblest ray, and hail it gladly, as the harbinger of approaching light. But some other course may have suggested itself to your mind."

Harding shook his head, saying—

"I am, to use your own words, altogether in the dark. Not a single beam of light is on the way before me."

"Then do as I suggest, my friend."

"I very seriously doubt," said the carpenter, "the truth of what they said about the carriage being in the direction of Beechwood. I followed them quickly, but saw nothing of either them or the carriage, although I kept on for at least half a mile."

"The carriage was, of course, withdrawn from the road, and concealed from view. I do not wonder at your not seeing it. The women, most probably, heard you coming after them, and hid behind some sheltering object, until you passed. The distance you went gave them an opportunity to gain the vehicle, and make their escape. As you did not meet the carriage on returning, the inference is plain, that the direction taken was not toward Beechwood. Now, if you can only find where it turned off from the road, and can thence follow the wheel-marks to the place of concealment, you may be able to trace them still farther, and thus determine, with

more or less certainty, the course taken. It will be something gained, to know that they did or did not go toward Beechwood."

"I will act at once upon your suggestion," said the carpenter. "No time is to be lost."

Just about the place which had been indicated, Harding found the deep impression of wheels in the soft turf, turning off abruptly from the beaten road. Following these, he discovered the spot where a carriage had been standing for some time, as was clear from the hoof-marks on the ground. It was behind a clump of trees. Beyond this, he could follow the tracks, until they were again lost in the road. One thing he was able to determine clearly: the carriage neither came from nor returned toward Beechwood. Between the place at which it had been stationed and the little settlement where the carpenter lived, a road leading to the town of Clifton branched off. He tried to follow the wheel-marks in the road, in order to be sure that the vehicle actually went toward Clifton; but the hard, beaten surface, and the mingling of other wheel-tracks, made this impossible.

It was now midday, and Harding returned home, intending, immediately after dinner, to start for Clifton, and devote the remainder of the day to searches in that direction. He found his wife waiting him in troubled suspense. A few words sufficed to give her the meager result of his efforts to discover their visitors of the previous evening. Her sad face and red eyes told but too plainly how she had spent the hours since his departure. The children were subdued in manner, and their sober faces showed how sincerely they were grieving for the loss of their sweet little playmate. Lotty had kept close beside her mother during all the morning; and whenever the latter sat down, overcome by her feelings, to weep, the child would come and lean against her, or draw her tiny arms about her neck, and say—

"If they don't bring her back, I will be your little Grace, mother."

How the words went thrilling to the mother's heart, going deeper and deeper every time they were repeated, until at last she could not help clasping the little one passionately to her bosom.

Harding, after eating a few mouthfuls of the dinner which he found awaiting his return, had left the table, and was preparing to leave the house, when Miss Gimp, the dressmaker, who had only half an hour before got home from Beechwood, came in with a look of importance on her thin face. In that particular crisis, she was far from being a welcome visitor; the more especially, as it was inferred by them from her manner, that she had by some means gained intelligence of what had occurred. She felt the reserve with which they treated her, and was somewhat piqued thereat; nevertheless, she could not keep back from them all that was in her mind, and said, soon after she came in, in order to introduce the subject—

"How is that dear little babe?" glancing around the room. "Asleep, I suppose?"

Was this a ruse to bring them out? Both Mr. and Mrs. Harding thought so; and therefore made no reply.

"I met a lady over at Beechwood," said Miss Gimp, "who asked about you and that babe with a good deal of interest."

"Indeed!"

Both Mr. and Mrs. Harding's indifference was gone.

"Who was she?"

Miss Gimp looked mysterious

"I don't feel at liberty to mention her name," she answered, with affected gravity.

"Was she an elderly lady?" inquired the carpenter.

"She was neither very old nor very young," said Miss Gimp.

"Though somewhat past middle age," remarked the carpenter, who saw that it was necessary to excite a little the dressmaker's curiosity, by appearing to have some knowledge of the person to whom she referred.

"Yes," said Miss Gimp, looking at the carpenter rather warily.

"With dark, penetrating eyes, and a peculiarly dignified, almost commanding manner."

"I found her pleasant and affable enough," said Miss Gimp.

"She can be so when it suits her purpose."

"Ah! you know her, then?" remarked the dressmaker, thrown off her guard.

"I have met her, I presume."

"She did not intimate this."

Miss Gimp looked a little puzzled.

"It was not necessary, I presume. Did you meet her in her own house?"

"Me? No, indeed. I haven't been to Clifton."

"Ah! True enough. You were at Beechwood?"

"Yes. At Mrs. Barclay's. Mrs. Beaufort"——

The dressmaker stopped suddenly; for she saw by the eager manner with which the carpenter bent toward her, that he was merely leading her on to tell what she knew about the lady to whom she had referred.

"Mrs. Beaufort of Clifton, the widow of General Beaufort?" said Harding, pressing on to the dressmaker so closely, that she could only answer in the affirmative.

"Yes; it was Mrs. Beaufort," she replied. "She is a sister of Mrs. Barclay, and was making a short visit at Beechwood while I was there."

"Did she leave yesterday?"

The carpenter asked the question in so indifferent a tone, that Miss Gimp was altogether deceived as to the amount of interest he felt.

"Yes. She went away some time in the afternoon,

I believe. Her going was thought rather sudden by the family. In fact, I heard Mrs. Barclay say to her daughter—the words were not meant for my ears—that she couldn't conceive what motive Mrs. Beaufort had for leaving so abruptly, and at so late an hour in the day."

"You will excuse me, Miss Gimp," said the carpenter, partly turning away, and taking up his hat from a chair.

"Men are always excusable," returned Miss Gimp. "Business has the first claim. So make no apologies."

"Mary!"

Harding looked at his wife, and she arose and followed him to the door.

"I am going over to Clifton," said he, "and will come back as early as possible. In the mean time, be on your guard with Miss Gimp, and do not, on any account, let her know what happened last night."

"Never fear, Jacob; she will learn nothing from me," returned Mrs. Harding. "But do you think that woman was Mrs. Beaufort of Clifton?"

"I am sure of it."

"Don't be too certain, Jacob. The disappointment, should the supposition prove untrue, will only be the greater."

"There is not a shadow of doubt on my mind, Mary—not a shadow. Good-by! I will be back as early as possible."

And the carpenter hurried away.

"You know, then, all about this Mrs. Beaufort?" said Miss Gimp, in the most insinuating way, as Mrs. Harding came back into the room.

"The lady about whom you were speaking to my husband just now?"

The utter indifference with which Mrs. Harding said this, surprised in no small degree the dressmaker.

"Yes. Mrs. Beaufort, who resides at Clifton."

Mrs. Harding shook her head. "On the contrary, I know nothing about her."

"Nothing? Well, that's strange! I'm sure your husband does, if you don't."

Miss Gimp was puzzled, disappointed, and a little fretted.

"That may all be," answered Mrs. Harding. "He sees a great many people who never come in my way."

"But, really, now, Mrs. Harding, just in confidence"—Miss Gimp leaned toward the carpenter's wife, and put on her most insinuating look—"don't you know something about Mrs. Beaufort? I'm sure you do. She had a great deal to say about you."

"Had she?"

"Yes, indeed; and about the baby in particular. Where is it?" and Miss Gimp's eyes looked around, searchingly.

"What about the baby?" said Mrs. Harding.

"And you don't know her at all?"

Mrs. Harding shook her head.

"It's my opinion, then, that she knows a great deal more about that baby than you do."

Almost impossible did Mrs. Harding find it to repress the strong desire she felt to question Miss Gimp closely, and to gain all she knew at the price of entire confidence; but her better judgment gave her self-control.

"That may be," she answered; "for we know nothing of its history. All I can say is, that I hope she may have as clear a conscience about the child as we have."

"Clear a conscience! How?"

And Miss Gimp's eyes went searching about the room again, and even tried to penetrate the adjoining chamber, through a small opening in the door.

"We have done our duty by the babe."

Miss Gimp was puzzled.



"How is the sweet little cherub?" she asked.

"Well," was the brief answer.

"Asleep, I suppose?"

"When did you leave Beechwood?" asked Mrs. Harding, not appearing to notice the dressmaker's question.

"This morning."

"How long were you there?"

"Several days."

"At Mrs. Barclay's, you said, I believe?"

"Yes. She sent her carriage for me, and took me over."

"And returned you in the same way?"

"Of course. She's very much of a lady, only so cold and reserved. Mrs. Beaufort, her husband's sister, is a very different kind of woman."

"In what respect?"

"Oh! she's so pleasant and talkative."

"What kind of a looking person is she?" asked Mrs. Harding.

"Tall, and very dignified. I never saw such a penetrating pair of black eyes in my life. They seem to look right through you sometimes. She takes a great deal of interest in you, let me tell you."

"Does she, indeed? I wonder why!"

How hard was it for the carpenter's wife to maintain her exterior indifference!

"No, you don't wonder," said Miss Gimp, whose close observation detected the hidden excitement the other was so anxious to conceal. "You know that you are dying, this minute, to hear all I can tell about Mrs. Beaufort."

"If you really think so," remarked Mrs. Harding, forcing a smile, "pray have compassion on me, and relieve my great suspense."

The dressmaker was at fault again.

"Oh!" she replied, with ill-concealed vexation, "if

you are so indifferent about the matter, I shall not trouble myself to enlighten you. I thought you would naturally feel an interest in learning something about a person who evidently knows a good deal more than you do about little Grace, and who, it is plain, has her eyes pretty closely fixed on you."

Saying this, Miss Gimp arose, and made a movement toward the door. She was very confident that this act would break down, at once, the assumed indifference of Mrs. Harding. But she erred. The latter was too clearly aware of how much was at stake to suffer herself to be thrown from her guard. All the information of any value possessed by Miss Gimp had been communicated. She saw this, as her mind grew calm and clear, and she was pleased that the prying gossip was about to depart. It was in vain that the dressmaker lingered, and tried to strike some new chord of interest. Nothing vibrated to her touch; and she withdrew, utterly disappointed in the object of her visit, and in a very bad humour with both the carpenter and his wife, whom she failed not to abuse, in round terms, during three neighbourly visits paid by her ere reaching her own dwelling.

## CHAPTER XVI.

IN a large chamber, the costly furniture of which was in the fashion of an earlier day, sat a pale but beautiful young woman, gazing fondly upon the lovely face of a sleeping child. She had no eye, no ear, no thought for any thing but the babe; for, as she sat thus, an elderly woman entered, and moved across the room, without attracting observation, until she stood close beside her.

"Edith!"

The young woman started, and her face slightly flushed.

"I did not hear you come in, mother," she said.

"You can neither hear nor see any thing, now, but that child."

The mother spoke with some harshness of manner.

Edith raised her eyes—they were not tearful, but calm and resolute—and fixing them on the face of her mother, she said, speaking slowly, yet firmly—

"Have I not said, mother, that this babe is dearer to me than life? Believe me, they were no idle words, uttered under excitement. For her sweet sake, I am prepared to give up every thing—to endure every thing. Let us, then, contend no longer."

"Think of the consequences, Edith! Cannot you think of these? Remember that Colonel D'Arcy will be here next week."

"Well?"

"And that he comes to claim your hand."

"Claim my hand?"

"It is promised," said Mrs. Beaufort.

"By whom?"

"By yourself. He has your written acceptance of his marriage offer."

"My written acceptance?"

"Yes. But why need you be reminded of this?"

Edith raised one hand, and clasping it tightly against her forehead, sat for some moments with a bewildered look.

"My written acceptance of Colonel D'Arcy's hand! Why do you say that, mother?"

"Because it is the truth. You wrote the letter of acceptance yourself."

"I did! When?"

Edith looked more surprised than ever.

"Scarcely two months have passed," was the firm answer.

"Ah!" A gleam of light shot across the young woman's face. "That, too," she added, with a sigh, "is becoming clear. By what dark spirit was I possessed? Mother! I have been on the very brink of insanity. The extorted pledges then made I now repudiate, as I have already repudiated the cruel act of abandoning my precious babe. Had I been in my right mind, I dare not now pray for forgiveness. The act of accepting Colonel D'Arcy is yours, mother, not mine. Your thought—your purpose—guided my hand when I wrote the letter, as it guided and controlled my actions on that day, of all days the darkest in the calendar of my unhappy life. But I have returned into my own proper self. I am clothed and in my right mind again; and, Heaven helping me, from this day forth I yield to no influence but that of my own sense of right and duty! I can work and suffer, mother. I can bend to any hard necessity that may come; but false to my woman's heart I will not be! The widow's tears are not yet dry on my cheeks, and shall I turn my heart from all its pure love? You need not scowl at me, mother—I did love him

with a full heart, tenderly. He was my husband, my excellent, true, noble-minded husband, poor and in humble station though he was; and the duty of public acknowledgment that I owe to his memory, to myself, and to his child, I am resolved to make, and that right speedily. My first great error was the concealment of our marriage from the world; the second was suffering him to go away alone. Oh that I could have been with him in his last extremity! My hand should have been the one that smoothed his pillow—my voice the last that sounded in his ears. Ah, mother!—hard, proud, exacting mother! With what memories have you cursed your child!"

Gradually her voice and manner deepened, until both displayed an almost fierce energy, before which Mrs. Beaufort—for she it was—felt herself cowering. Hitherto her imperious will had ruled her daughter; but now her power over her was at an end, and she felt that it was so. The darling scheme, to compass which she had trampled the most sacred obligations under foot—making her suffering child a participator, even at the risk of dethroning her reason—had come to naught; and in its hopeless failure, other ruin was involved. Gone for ever—she saw, in this second strong encounter with Edith, that it was so—gone for ever was all power to bend that young spirit to her will. But, what next? Could she turn from her child in proud anger, and go forward on her life-path alone? She asked herself the question; and the very thought caused a quick gasping for breath, as if she were about to suffocate. A little while she remained standing near Edith; then, without replying, she went slowly from the room.

An hour afterward she returned, entering the chamber of her daughter as noiselessly as before. A low, sweet, cooing voice stole into her ears as she passed through the door, and thrilled her whole being with a strange emo-

tion—a mingling of exquisite pleasure and pain. It was the baby's voice. Little Grace was lying on the bed, and over her bent Edith.

"Darling! Sweet one! Darling!"

Thus her mother spoke to her, and at each tenderly uttered word, she answered with a loving response.

"My sweet baby!"

And a shower of kisses followed the words.

The babe still answered, with its sweet, low murmur, every word and every act of endearment. She lay, partly elevated on a pillow, and in such a position that Mrs. Beaufort could see her face, while she remained unobserved by her daughter. The hour passed alone had been one of strong self-conflict—ending with self-conviction of wrong. The proud, unscrupulous woman of the world chafed for a time against the iron bars of necessity with which she found herself enclosed, and then gave up the vain struggle.

"Hard, proud, exacting mother! With what memories have you cursed your child!" How the words continued to ring in her ears, until chords were thrilled which had given forth no sound for years. Calmness succeeded to powerful emotion; and with this subsiding of the storm, came touches of gentler feeling.

"My poor child!" she sighed to herself, as some vivid realizations of what Edith had suffered startled her into a new consciousness.

This was Mrs. Beaufort's state of mind when she entered Edith's chamber. It was not the first time that the voice of Grace had awakened echoes in her heart. None but she knew the struggle that it cost to part with the babe, when cruel pride and worldly interests demanded its abandonment. Angry as she had been at her daughter's secret marriage with a young man in humble life, when the fact was made known to her, and almost driven to madness when the babe came to mar all the

well-schemed future—still, in its lovely innocence, that babe had glided into her heart, and made for itself a place there in spite of all her efforts to keep it out and to cast it out. Witness her two visits at the carpenter's, in venturing which so much was endangered.

In full view was the babe's face, as she entered the room of Edith. What a heavenly beauty radiated therefrom! What a winning sweetness was in her murmured replies, as she answered to the voice of her mother!

"Edith!" said Mrs. Beaufort.

Edith started, as before, and a shadow fell on her countenance, as she turned toward her parent.

"Edith, my daughter!" There was a tremulousness in the tones of Mrs. Beaufort, that betrayed her softened feelings. A few moments Edith looked into her face, doubtingly; then she saw that her eyes were dimmed by gathering tears.

"Oh, my mother! my mother!" she exclaimed, in a voice of passionate entreaty; "will you not take this precious darling to your heart, as once you took me?" And she lifted Grace quickly from the bed, and held her toward her mother. "Her hands are outstretched, mother! She asks for a place in your heart. Will you not let her in? A Heaven-sent blessing to us both she will prove—an angel in our home to smile away the darkness that has overshadowed it so long. Dear mother! gather us both in your arms! Mother! mother!"

The last brief struggle was over. Around them both the arms of Mrs. Beaufort were flung, and, with a strong compression, she drew them to her heart.

"My child! my child!" she sobbed, as her tears fell over the face of Edith and the babe. "Even so let it be. There is room enough for both. I will take her in. Nay—she is there already."



## CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. BEAUFORT, the widow of General Beaufort, a man of wealth, who had attained considerable political distinction during his lifetime, was left with an only daughter, Edith, for whom she had large ambition. A very selfish and self-willed woman, she yet loved this child with an absorbing intensity rarely witnessed. Edith was a part of herself, and she loved herself in its reproduction in her child, with a largely increased vitality.

But very unlike her mother was Edith. In her, the milder, better traits of her father predominated, and this gave room for the acquirement, by such a woman as Mrs. Beaufort, of almost unbounded control over her. From the beginning, the most implicit obedience had been exacted; and as it was ever an easy sacrifice for Edith to give up her own will, the requirement of her mother came to be the law of her actions.

While Edith remained a child, the current of these two lives—that of the mother and daughter—flowed on together at the same velocity, and in channels bending ever in the same direction. But there came a time when the surface of that gently gliding child-life began breaking into ripples—when the heart claimed its freedom to love what its own pure instincts regarded as lovely.

From the earliest time, had the thoughts of Mrs. Beaufort reached forward to the period when Edith's hand would be claimed in marriage; but not once had qualities of mind and heart elevated themselves, in the prospective husband, above family, wealth, and high position in the world.

As Edith grew up, and the pure young girl expanded into lovely womanhood, her personal attractions, as well as her station in life, drew suitors around her; but all failed to win their way into her affections. Among these was a Colonel D'Arcy, a man of wealth and station, who in every thing satisfied the ambition of Mrs. Beaufort. Well-educated, accomplished, possessing a fine person and a large share of self-esteem, Colonel D'Arcy, on approaching the lovely heiress, might have exclaimed with Cæsar, at the battle of Ziccla, "*Veni, vidi, vici!*"

But he came, he saw, and did *not* conquer. The heart of Edith was too true in its perceptions to make an error here. Utterly repulsive to her was this confident suitor. The sphere of his quality surrounded him like the subtle odour of a noxious plant, and her delicate moral sense perceived this quality the instant he approached. That he repelled instead of attracting her, D'Arcy saw at their earliest interview. This piqued his pride, and, in the first excitement occasioned by Edith's cool reception, he vowed that he would "win her and wear her." It did not take long to satisfy the gallant colonel that the storming of a fort was an easier task than the storming of a heart. That of Miss Beaufort he found impregnable under all his known modes of warfare.

That the mother favoured his suit, Colonel D'Arcy saw from the beginning; but a proud confidence in his own powers would not let him stoop to solicit her as an ally. Yet he had to do so in the end. Against their joint assault, aware, as he had become, of Mrs. Beaufort's influence over her daughter, he was certain there would only be a short resistance. Here, again, he erred. Edith unhesitatingly declared to her mother that no power on earth would induce her to accept the hand of Colonel D'Arcy, for whom she had the most intense repugnance. Never before had her daughter so boldly set at naught her will. The fiery indignation of Mrs. Beau-

fort burned fiercely for a time, and in her blind passion she did not hesitate to utter the maddest threats of consequences, if there was not an instant compliance with her wishes.

"I can imagine nothing so dreadful as to become the wife of that man," Edith would answer—shuddering as she answered—every intemperate appeal. And little beyond this did she say; for all her words, she knew, must fall idly on her mother's ears.

Meantime, at the house of a friend in the neighbourhood, she met with a young man, named Percival, who was paying a short visit there. He resided in the city of B——, distant a hundred miles, where he was pursuing the study of law. He was poor, with few interested friends, and had the world all before him. At their first meeting, Henry Percival did not know even the name, much less the social position of Miss Beaufort; and she was as ignorant of all that appertained to him. But from the eyes of each looked forth upon the other a congenial spirit, that was seen and recognised.

The progressive steps of their intimacy we will not pause to relate. On the part of Percival, there was no design, in the beginning, to win the heart of Edith; and when he saw that it was his, and reflected on the wide disparity of their possessions, the discovery saddened his spirit, for he saw, darkening over both their futures, a stormy cloud.

On returning home to pursue his studies, he arranged with Edith for a regular correspondence, which was conducted for nearly a year, without becoming known to Mrs. Beaufort. At the end of that time, he came back to Clifton, when he and Edith were secretly married. The precipitation of this act was caused by Mrs. Beaufort's acceptance of Colonel D'Arcy in the name of her daughter, and the actual appointment of a day, some two

or three months distant, when the nuptial ceremonies were to take place.

In order to free Edith from the martyrdom in which her life was passed, and to get for ever rid of Colonel D'Arcy, the young couple resolved upon this step. It was taken, and notice thereof at once communicated to Mrs. Beaufort, coupled with the intelligence that the bridegroom and bride would present themselves before her after the lapse of a week, and claim forgiveness and a blessing.

We will not attempt to describe the state of mind into which Mrs. Beaufort was thrown by this undreamed-of intelligence. Her very life's love was assailed and threatened with extinction. No eye but that of Heaven saw her, as, in the secrecy of her own chamber, she endured the wild conflict of passion that succeeded; but marks of the fearful storm were too plainly visible on her altered face, when she came forth in her stately composure.

The week passed, and then Edith and her young husband presented themselves. The first she received with icy coldness; the latter she overwhelmed with bitter denunciation and the most withering scorn.

"Come, Henry," said the young wife, laying her hand upon his arm, and drawing him away—"I will not hear you addressed in such language, even by my mother. You are my husband, and the wide world is ours."

There was a simple dignity, blended with unmistakable purpose in this, that confounded as well as surprised Mrs. Beaufort. Edith had already turned away, and was moving with her husband toward the door through which they had just entered.

"Edith! Girl!"

The voice of the mother arose almost into a cry of anguish.

Edith paused, and turning, looked back. Her face

was colourless, and all its lines rigid from excessive emotion; but it was resolute.

"I have cast my lot in life, and with deliberation, mother," she said. "You left me no other course. Death I could have met calmly, but not the destiny you assigned me. This man is my husband, chosen from all other men, and with him I shall go through the world. If you receive not him, you cannot receive me."

"Mad girl! mad girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Beaufort, as she staggered back a few steps, and sunk upon a chair. "How have you flung to the stormy winds every dearest hope of my life!"

Edith left her husband's side, and going quickly to her mother, laid her hand gently upon her hot forehead, on which the veins were swollen into chords. The touch of that soft hand thrilled magnetically along every nerve. For some minutes Mrs. Beaufort sat entirely passive.

Ah! she could not live without her child; and never did she feel that truth more deeply or more painfully. Indignant pride would have flung her off and disowned her for ever; but intense love clung to her even as the drowning cling to a straw.

"O Edith! my child! what have you done?"

As these words came almost sobbing from her lips, Mrs. Beaufort arose and went from the room with unsteady steps.

When, after the lapse of two hours, she rejoined Edith and her husband, it was to meet them with a kindness of manner that took both by surprise. Below this assumed exterior, Percival, who had a quick, penetrating mind, saw concealed a sinister purpose; but Edith, too happy at so broad a concession, believed that her mother had resolved to make the best of circumstances, which no act of hers could change. The first inquiries made by Mrs. Beaufort were in reference to the publicity which had been given to the marriage. On learning that every

thing had been conducted with the strictest secrecy, and that the fact was only known to one or two pledged friends, who were to be relied upon, she expressed much satisfaction, and at once proposed further measures of concealment for the present.

To these proposals, Percival and Edith, after some persuasion, were induced to accede; and at an early day the young man returned to B—— alone, to enter upon the practice of his profession, he having been just admitted to the bar.

Six or seven months elapsed, during which time Percival had twice visited Clifton, arriving, by arrangement, late in the evening, and not showing himself to any visitor during the brief period he remained. To both himself and Edith, this secrecy was growing daily more and more oppressive and repugnant, and it was only maintained through the powerful influence of Mrs. Beaufort.

About this time, a gentleman from New Orleans called upon Percival, and made him liberal offers if he would go to the South. This person's name was Maris. He had been in correspondence for some two years with Percival's legal preceptor, and at his instance made the proposition to which we have referred. The opening promised to be so largely advantageous, that the young man felt bound to accept of it. Previously to doing so, he repaired to Clifton to consult with his wife and mother-in-law. Edith made some feeble objections; but Mrs. Beaufort was so decided in her approval, that she acquiesced, and immediate preparations for departure were made.

For three months letters came regularly from Percival, whose residence was New Orleans. He spoke with animation of his opening prospects, and shadowed forth, in ardent fancy, a future of brilliant success in his profession. Then came a longer silence than usual; then a

letter from Mr. Maris, announcing Percival's dangerous illness with a Southern fever. Two weeks more—weeks of agony to the young wife—and the terrible news of his death came, with mournful details of the last extremity. In the midst of Edith's wild anguish, a babe was born—the sweet little Grace, in whom the reader feels so tender an interest. Around this event, Mrs. Beaufort threw every possible vail of concealment, even going so far as to bribe to secrecy, by most liberal inducements, every member of her household that became necessarily aware of the circumstances.

Weak in body and mind—prostrate, in fact, under the heavy blow that fell so suddenly upon her—Edith became passive in the hands of her mother, and obeyed her, for a time, with the unquestioning docility of a little child. Even her mind, in its feeble state, became impressed with the idea of secrecy, so steadily enjoined by Mrs. Beaufort; and, in presence of the few visitors whom she could not refuse to see, she assumed a false exterior, and most sedulously concealed every thing that could awake even a remote suspicion that she had been a wife, and was now a mother.

Meantime, under all the disadvantages of its position, the babe was steadily winning its way into a heart that, from the beginning, shut the door against it, with a resolute and cruel purpose. Mrs. Beaufort could never come where it was, without feeling a desire to take it in her arms, and hug it to her bosom; and the more she resisted this desire, the stronger it became, until the conflict occasioned kept her in a constant state of excitement.

A few weeks after the news of Percival's death was received, Colonel D'Arcy visited Clifton. On being announced, Edith positively refused to see him; and her feeble state warranted, even in her mother's view, the decision. He remained only a short time; but, on



leaving, placed in the hands of Mrs. Beaufort an epistle for her daughter, couched in the tenderest language, and renewing previous offers of his hand.

Percival out of the way, Mrs. Beaufort was now more than ever resolved to compass this darling scheme of her heart—the marriage of her daughter with Colonel D'Arcy. The first step in its sure accomplishment was to get the child out of the way. But how was this to be done? It was a fine, healthy child, more than usually forward for its age, and in no way likely to die speedily, unless—unless? Did thoughts of murder stir in the mind of that proud, selfish, cruel woman? Such thoughts were suggested, and even pondered! But other thoughts—of disgrace and punishment—came quickly to drive them out. The abandonment of Grace was next determined upon. To effect this, she first induced Edith—who, from grief, sickness, and incessant persecution, had entirely lost her mental equipoise—to write a letter of acceptance to Colonel D'Arcy. Passive hopelessness left her a mere instrument in her mother's hands. For her acts she was scarcely responsible. The letter of acceptance passed speedily from her, and went on its mission, beyond recall. This fact of acceptance was a great power gained over Edith—a power that Mrs. Beaufort, seeing her vantage ground, used with a heartless rigour, that finally led to the cruel act of desertion already known to the reader.

For two weeks subsequent to Edith's return home, after placing the basket containing her babe at the door of Mr. Harding—she had resisted all persuasion, entreaty, and command of her mother to leave that task for another—she retained but little consciousness of surrounding circumstances. The trial proved too great; and her over-tried spirit sought protection and repose in partial oblivion. Slowly recovering, her first sane thoughts were of her babe; and, though she said nothing of her

purpose to her mother, she was fully resolved, the moment strength came for the effort, to regain possession thereof, publicly acknowledging it and her marriage, and, if that sad necessity were imposed, go forth from her mother's house into the world alone.

The meeting at Harding's was quite as great a surprise to Edith as to her mother; but it was all the better, as giving occasion for the unqualified declaration of her future purpose—a declaration that, as has been seen, she was prepared to sustain.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

“IF the heart is not satisfied, mother, life at best is a heavy burden.”

Mrs. Beaufort and her daughter were sitting together, on the day after their recovery of Grace, and talking calmly of the future. Hopeless of attaining her ambitious ends, the former had given up the struggle, so long continued. Even though but a few hours had passed since the unequal strife with Edith, she was becoming clearly conscious that her course of action toward her child had been far from just or humane, and that her position gave her no right to exercise so tyrannical an influence. No longer compelled, by her own selfish purposes, to cherish a feeling of antipathy toward Grace, she found her heart beginning to flow forth toward the lovely infant. Such was the nameless attraction possessed by the babe, that even with all her powerful reasons for wishing to annihilate her, if that were pos-

sible, Mrs. Beaufort had not been able to resist the sphere of her love-inspiring innocence. Now, when no barrier to affection reared itself, her heart turned toward the infant, and opened itself with eagerness to take her in. Quick to perceive the real change in her mother's feelings toward Grace, Edith placed the little one in her arms, and with a thrill of exquisite delight saw it drawn impulsively to her bosom. In that moment, the work of reconciliation was accomplished. Against the winning attractions of Grace, Mrs. Beaufort had striven from the beginning, but never with perfect success. It was all in vain, that, to satisfy pride and ambition, she had cast her off; even in the separation, her heart had mirrored the babe's sweet image; turned ever and anon toward her; and yearned for her restoration. And now, when she came back to brighten, with her seraphic presence, the darkness of their unhappy home, and no strong motive for thrusting her out remained, her heart leaped toward her, panting with its long-endured thirst to love, and receiving her therein with joy and gladness.

"O mother!" added Edith, as they sat together, each striving for, and feeling the way toward a truer reconciliation, "how vainly do we seek for happiness, if we seek it beyond the range of our own true wants! We must look inward—not outward. We must ask of our hearts—not of the world—how, and where, and with what companionship we are to spend our life's probation. As for me, I desire nothing beyond my own home, and an entire devotion of all I have and all I am to my child. If that will satisfy me, why should any one seek my unhappiness by dragging me into uncongenial spheres, or cursing me with associations against which my whole nature revolts with loathing? As for Colonel D'Arcy—I speak of him now, because you are better prepared to understand me than ever before—his friendship even oppresses me. But, when he seeks a nearer association—

presumes to ask of me the love given but once, and never to be given again—I am almost suffocated with disgust. Yield him my hand, mother! Never while I have strength to bind it to my side. I would brave a thousand deaths in preference. He is a bad man—I know it by the quick repugnance that fills my heart whenever he comes near me. Did he possess a single germ of true manliness, he would not pursue me after all that has passed.”

A servant interrupted them by announcing that a strange man had called, and asked to see Mrs. Beaufort.

“What is his name?” inquired the lady.

“He wishes to see you a moment; but would not give his name.”

“What kind of a looking man?”

The servant described him.

“Say that I will be down in a few moments.” As the servant withdrew, the whole manner of Mrs. Beaufort changed. “It is Harding,” said she.

Edith started, and turned pale, at the same time lifting Grace from her mother’s arms.

“What is to be done? How did he find his way here?”

“We must see him,” said Mrs. Beaufort, after a few moments of hurried reflection.

“Both of us?”

“Yes, Edith, both of us. And he must see Grace. Nothing is left now, but to conciliate, and bring him, a certain degree, into our confidence. He and his wife proved faithful to the trust reposed in them. They loved our little Grace truly, and cared for her tenderly; and they must have their reward. There was a fine manliness about his conduct last night, that raised him high in my estimation. I think he can be trusted.”

“But he frightened me so, mother: he spoke so harshly, and seemed so cruel.”

"Was he not right, Edith, in seeking to prevent our taking away the babe, strangers as we were, and refusing, as we did, to give any satisfaction as to our personality? He was right, and I approved his manly firmness at the time."

"I wish you would meet him alone, mother."

"I do not think that will be best," replied Mrs. Beaufort. "We must not let him see that we are afraid of him. Our relations are very different from what they were last evening; and if we show a consciousness of our real position, he will not be slow to perceive his own."

The room into which the carpenter had been shown was a large parlour, richly furnished, its six windows draped with heavy curtains of red satin damask. Around the walls were hung many pictures, among which his eyes soon recognised his two visitors of the previous night, Mrs. Beaufort and her daughter. The portrait of Edith had been taken some five years previous, and, while it still bore to her a striking resemblance, had all the innocent sweetness of gentle girlhood. As he gazed, with a kind of fascination, upon this pictured countenance, it seemed to change and grow life-like, and he almost started to his feet as he saw the eyes of dear little Grace looking down, with a loving expression, from the canvas. He was scarcely freed from the illusion, when he became aware that footsteps drew near the door. Turning, he met the calm, dignified face of Mrs. Beaufort, and the pale, timid, half-frightened countenance of her daughter, who held the babe he had lost closely drawn to her bosom.

"Mr. Harding!" said Mrs. Beaufort, speaking with entire self-possession, and giving her hand to the carpenter as she advanced to meet him. "So you have found us, my good friend," she added; "and it is, perhaps, as well. We had powerful reasons for desiring to remain unknown. Under the circumstances, this was

hardly possible. You, at least, were not to be baffled in your search, as this early visit testifies. Sit down, Mr. Harding. We had better understand each other fully."

Harding was somewhat bewildered by the calmness of his reception. From the dignified countenance of Mrs. Beaufort, his eyes turned to the sweet babe that lay so closely drawn against the breast of its mother: as they did so, a softened expression passed over his rough face.

"Grace! Grace!" he said, tenderly, and advancing, reached out his hands.

Edith moved off a pace or two; but the little one, the moment she heard the well-known voice, started up, and, with a glad murmur, fluttered her rosy fingers, and leaned eagerly forward, while her whole face was lit up with a joyful recognition. Edith drew her back, while an expression of anxiety and alarm dimmed her countenance.

"Let her come to me, ma'am," said the carpenter, in a respectful voice—it trembled with feeling.

Edith glanced toward the door, fearfully. Harding understood the meaning of this.

"You need not mistrust me, ma'am." He stepped to the door, and closed it. As he returned to where she stood, he continued—"Jacob Harding has gone thus far in life without a treacherous action, and he will not violate his honour now. Let her come to me; oh! let her come! Let me feel the dear one again in my arms, where she has lain so many, many times."

Mrs. Beaufort, seeing that her daughter still hesitated, took Grace from her arms, and placed her in those of the carpenter. As Harding received the precious burden, he clasped her passionately, and spoke to her in the most endearing tones. The little one answered him with her sweet love-language, and even drew her tiny arms about his neck. How wildly he kissed her! Dim were his eyes as he restored her to her mother; and he spoke not, for emotion was too strong.

"I am foolish," he said, as he recovered himself. "It is not manly, I know; but that child has, from the beginning, softened my heart, until it has become weak as a woman's. How you could ever have parted with her"—this thought restored his self-possession, and he spoke with something of a rebuking sternness—"passes my comprehension."

"And it passes mine! it passes mine!" murmured Edith, speaking to herself, as she bent lower over the babe, which the carpenter had restored to her arms.

"As for the past," said Mrs. Beaufort—she spoke with a calmness and self-possession that had its effect on Harding—"that must sleep, my friend, with its errors and sufferings, as far as memory will let it sleep. All I will say of it to you is, that I had ambitious views in regard to my daughter, which she frustrated by a secret marriage. The death of her young husband, a few months afterward, and while I was yet able to prevent the fact from becoming known, revived all my ambitious hopes. The birth of this child I was able to conceal; and, moreover, succeeded in so overshadowing the mind of its mother, as to induce her, in a moment of partial derangement, to abandon it at your door—not yours by choice, but by accident. The rest you know. The mother's heart was too strong in my child. Her babe is again on her bosom, and there it must remain. Her grateful thanks are yours for the tenderness with which you have cared for the babe; and she will not let her gratitude, believe me, rest in her mind a fruitless sentiment. For the present, all we ask of you is discretion. Let the knowledge of our personality in connection with this matter remain wholly with you and your wife. Of course the babe must now be acknowledged, and we shall proceed, without delay, to give public, indisputable evidence of my daughter's marriage. As to the abandonment of the child, with the circumstances attending it,

if all becomes known in each minute particular, we shall suffer strong opprobrium. Very naturally, I wish to escape this myself, and especially to save my daughter from the charge of having abandoned to strangers, of whom she knew nothing, her own tender infant. Can we trust in your prudence? Will you not bind yourselves to us—you and your wife—by a new debt of gratitude?"

It was some time before Harding made any answer. His mind was bewildered by what Mrs. Beaufort said. Plain enough was it, that the angel of their household was to return to them no more; and the shadow already on his heart fell colder and darker.

"All does not lie with us," he remarked, scarcely reflecting on what he said.

"Why not on you?"

Mrs. Beaufort spoke anxiously.

"The dressmaker you saw at Mrs. Barclay's yesterday directed my suspicions toward you."

"What!"

Mrs. Beaufort grew excited.

"Miss Gimp told me that you manifested a singular interest in us and the babe. I asked her to describe you, and knew you by the description in a moment; therefore I am here."

"Bad—bad. That is bad. I was imprudent."

Mrs. Beaufort spoke to herself.

"I have also seen Mrs. Hartley of Overton."

The face of Mrs. Beaufort flushed.

"She knew you by my description."

"Well?"

"But refused to say who you was or where I could find you, unless I gave her my entire confidence."

"Which you——"

"Did not," replied Harding. "Every thing was so much involved in mystery, that I chose to be discreet."



"That was well. But Miss Gimp—does she know of what took place last night?"

"No one knows it out of my family, except Mr. Long, the schoolmaster, whose prudence is altogether to be relied on."

It was now Mrs. Beaufort's turn to be silent. For many minutes she sat revolving in her mind all the difficult aspects of the affair in which she had become involved. At length she said—

"Mr. Harding, all we ask of you now is, entire silence to every one for the present, in regard to what has transpired. We will offer you no personal inducement to secure this, for that would be an insult to your manliness of character. But you have laid us, and can still lay us, under a heavy burden of gratitude. May we trust you?"

"As entirely as you can trust yourselves," was the unhesitating answer. "I see no good that can arise from bruiting the matter abroad. Why, then, shall it be done? But there is one thing I must ask."

"Name it."

"The privilege for my wife of seeing the babe. Ah, ma'am! you know not how she loves it. For many weeks it slept in her bosom, until it has grown to be a part of herself. You know not her distress at its loss. Her eyes have been full of tears ever since. To us all, the child has been as an angel. Strife has ceased in its blessed presence, and the lowest murmur of its sweet voice has been a 'Peace, be still,' to the wildest storm of passion."

"Bring her here to-morrow," said Mrs. Beaufort, with a good-will in her voice, that betokened her earnestness. "We would send our carriage, but for reasons that need not be suggested to you."

"Yes; bring her over," added Edith. "I wish to

see her and know her. She has laid my heart under a debt of gratitude."

Harding arose. "Once more let me feel her in my arms," said he, as he fixed his eyes lovingly on the infant.

The timid mother did not hesitate, but resigned to him the babe, that looked up fondly in his face, and smiled its sweetest smile.

"God bless you and keep you." Harding spoke with deep feeling. He could say no more. Kissing the pure lips and brow many times fervently, he handed the babe back to her mother. As soon as he had recovered his self-possession, he withdrew formally, saying that he would see them, in company with his wife, some time during the next day. A few minutes afterward, he was galloping homeward as fast as his horse's feet would carry him.

## CHAPTER XIX.

THOUGH removed from them, as to bodily presence, the angel of their household still remained with the carpenter and his family. Not a member thereof, from the rugged father down to little Lotty, but saw ever before the eyes of their spirits, the dear young face that brought sunlight into their darkened dwelling; but they saw her with tear-moistened vision. She was no longer theirs in physical actuality; but present as in a dream that is never forgotten. Subdued even to sadness, the intercourse between the members of the family was marked by a tender regard, the one for the other. Each felt the other's grief at the loss of Grace, and desired to lighten instead of increasing its pressure. As for Lotty, since Grace left them, she had sought to win for herself that regard in her mother's heart which the stranger had occupied. She was too young for reflection, and only obeyed a heaven-inspired instinct. And as she knocked at the too long closed door of her mother's heart, that door gradually yielded, until at last the rusty hinges opposed no resistance, and it swung wide open to take her in.

The intelligence brought back from Clifton, while it set the tears of Mrs. Harding to flowing afresh, because it extinguished all hope of the babe's restoration to her arms, relieved her mind greatly. There was a certainty about this intelligence, that settled the doubtful question of its fate. It was, and would be well with the child. Her love for it could ask no more, though her heart was bleeding from the separation.

To the eager questions of the children—"Where is

Grace?" "Have you seen Grace, father?" "Isn't she coming back any more?"—Mr. Harding answered with as much information in regard to her as he deemed prudent, assuring them, at the same time, that if Grace did not come to them again, they should go to see her.

During the evening, Mr. Long, the schoolmaster, called to learn the result of Harding's visit to Clifton. To him, as a friend fully to be confided in, the carpenter related the occurrences of the day.

"She has been such a blessing, such a comfort to us," said Mrs. Harding, as they sat talking of Grace.

"God has given you many comforts, many blessings," answered the schoolmaster, as he glanced meaningly toward her children, who were all present, quiet, half-wondering auditors. Andrew, over whom Mr. Long had already acquired great influence, was standing beside his teacher, proud of the notice and gratified with the kindness ever extended to him by his judicious friend; while Lotty, who had climbed into her mother's lap, was lying close against her breast, looking contented—even happy.

It was on the lips of Mrs. Harding to reply, "If they were only like Grace." But her conscience rebuked her for the thought ere it found utterance, and she remained silent. But she took the lesson to her heart, and as she did so, drew her arm involuntarily tighter around Lotty, who, feeling the pressure, looked up at her mother with a smile of love. In return, the soft cheek of the mother was bent down until it rested on the sunny hair of her child.

The schoolmaster saw that he was clearly understood, and did not mar the good impression of his words by seeking to enforce their meaning.

On the next morning, quite early, Mr. and Mrs. Harding, accompanied by Lotty, started for Clifton. They had to pass the door of Miss Gimp, the dressmaker, on their way, and she failed not to discover the fact that the

carpenter and his wife were riding out together—an event too noteworthy to be regarded with indifference.

“What does this mean? Where are they going?”

Such were her rather excited questions, as she laid aside her work, and took her place at the window, to note the direction they would take.

“Over to Clifton? Hardly. Yes—I declare!—if they haven’t taken the road to Clifton! Ah, ha! There’s something in the wind. I wonder if they can be going over to Mrs. Beaufort’s. I thought I could see deeper into the mind of Mrs. Harding than she cared for. I was sure she knew more about Mrs. Beaufort than was pretended. But whose child is it? I’d give my little finger to know.”

Unable to work with this mystery on her mind, Miss Gimp drew on her bonnet, and ran over to see Mrs. Willits, the storekeeper’s wife, for just a minute.

“Our carpenter is getting up in the world,” said she, as soon as she could thrust in the words, after meeting her friend.

“So I should think,” answered Mrs. Willits, who had seen Harding go by; “riding out with his wife at a time when other people are at work. My husband can’t afford such indulgence.”

“They were always a shiftless set.”

Miss Gimp spoke with some indignation. She could not forgive Mrs. Harding for the impenetrable reserve she had thrown around herself at their interview on the previous afternoon—a reserve felt to be both a wrong and an insult.

“And will come to beggary in the end,” said Mrs. Willits. “It was only last evening that I heard Mr. Grant going on about Harding at a great rate. It appears that he had promised to call over early in the morning to consult with him in regard to a job that Grant, the farmer, wanted done. Mr. Grant waited at

home until dinner-time, but no carpenter came. It made him terribly angry. He stopped at our store in the evening, and the way he talked about Harding would have done you good to hear. He gave it to him right and left, I can assure you."

"Didn't keep his promise with him?"

"Not he—Mr. Indifference or Mr. Independence, whichever you choose to call him."

"Mr. Shiftless, you'd better say."

"Well, Mr. Shiftless, then. And now he's playing the gentleman—riding out with his wife as coolly as if he hadn't lost a good job!"

"Mr. Grant won't have any thing more to do with him?"

Miss Gimp spoke with a kind of pleased inquiry.

"Not he."

"Serves him right."

"Of course it does. He said that early this morning he would go to Beechwood and engage a carpenter there; and he swore—for he was in a great passion—that if Harding starved, he'd never handle a dollar of his money so long as he lived."

"I don't blame him," said Miss Gimp.

"Nobody can blame him," responded Mrs. Willits.

"D'ye know," remarked the dressmaker, lowering her voice, and speaking mysteriously, "that in my opinion something more than a mere pleasure ride takes them out this morning."

"What are they after? where are they going?" inquired Mrs. Willits, brightening up at this intimation on the part of Miss Gimp.

"They took the road to Clifton, I'm certain."

"To Clifton! Well, what great and mighty business takes them over to Clifton, I'd like to know?"

"Something about that child they've got, I'll venture my existence," said Miss Gimp.

“What of it?”

Mrs. Willits brightened up still more.

“I think I can guess where it came from.”

“Indeed!”

“Of course, it is only guess-work; but, in putting this and that together, you know, we often get very near the truth. I’ve been sewing at Mrs. Barclay’s in Beechwood.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve heard of Mrs. General Beaufort, who lives in Clifton?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I never knew it before; but she’s the sister of Mr. Barclay.”

“Is she?”

“Yes. And she came over to see her brother about something while I was there.”

“Well?”

“One day, when all the family were out, she came into the room where I was alone, sewing, and made herself quite sociable. After talking around a while, she asked if I knew Harding and his family. I said that I did. Then she wanted to know what kind of people they were. Of course, I couldn’t give them a very exalted character, and didn’t. It was plain enough to be seen that she had some secret interest in them. Who first spoke of that little foundling baby, I can’t now remember; but the moment it was named, I saw that she knew a great deal more about it than she cared me to guess. In order to bring her out, I spoke of Harding and his wife in the strongest manner—taking good care to say, that in placing that child in their hands, it was like putting a lamb among wolves. She grew uneasy and excited at this; so much so, that she clearly felt that she was betraying herself, and left me abruptly. That afternoon she went away, very unexpectedly to the fa-

mily. Depend upon it, Mrs. Willits, she knows all about that baby."

"Why don't you go to see Mrs. Harding, and feel around her?" inquired the storekeeper's wife, who had become much interested in the dressmaker's gossip.

"I've been already," answered Miss Gimp. "I came away from Mrs. Barclay's a day sooner than I intended, and on purpose."

"Ah? Well, what did you make out of her?"

"Nothing certain. I saw Harding and his wife, but they were as close-mouthed as terrapins."

"Did you speak to them of Mrs. Beaufort?"

"Yes; and its just my opinion that they got out of me all I know, and didn't let me see below the surface of their thoughts. I was so provoked!"

"And so you learned nothing?" said Mrs. Willits.

"Nothing certain. But it takes sharper people than they are to hide things from my eyes. That both were greatly interested in Mrs. Beaufort, and knew far more about her than they chose to tell, was plain enough; and that their ride over to Clifton, this morning, is to see her, I do not in the last doubt."

"I shouldn't wonder at all," remarked Mrs. Willits. "Mrs. General Beaufort! That is news. Has she a daughter?"

"I don't know," replied Miss Gimp.

"Why didn't you ask Mrs. Barclay?"

"Just what I've said to myself twenty times over. I'm provoked to death at my own stupidity."

"How soon are you going over there again?"

"I can't tell. I don't think Mrs. Barclay will want me very soon."

"We must find out in some way."

"Yes, indeed. I'll not rest until I know all about it. You remember that Harry Wilkins saw a woman carrying a basket on the night the child was left at Harding's?"



"Yes."

"Very well. He told me that he's certain he saw the same woman, riding in a carriage, in the neighbourhood of Clifton. Put this and that together, Mrs. Willits, and it isn't very hard to make out a case."

"I should think not. Depend upon it, you're fairly on the track. Harding isn't riding out, this morning, for nothing. Had they the baby with them?"

"That I couldn't see. I tried my best to look over into Mrs. Harding's arms, but her husband was on the side next to me, and though I got up into a chair, it was of no use. But I shouldn't at all wonder."

"I'll tell you how you can find out."

"How?"

"Just by running over to their house for a minute. Of course, nobody's at home but the children."

"That's it," replied Miss Gimp, starting up. "I'll go this instant." And she stepped toward the door.

"Don't forget to stop as you come back," said the storekeeper's wife.

"Oh! no. I'll be sure to call."

And Miss Gimp left with the sprightly step of a young girl of sixteen. In some twenty minutes, she returned.

"Well?" said Mrs. Willits, as she came in.

"No child there," answered the dressmaker.

"No? Indeed?"

"True as preaching."

"Where is it?"

Miss Gimp shook her head.

"Who was there?"

"Only Philip and Lucy."

"Couldn't they tell?"

"They couldn't, or wouldn't—which, I am at a loss to say. I never saw such mum, stupid little wretches in my life."

"Did you ask them where their father and mother had gone?"

"Yes."

"What answer did they make?"

"Said they didn't know."

"They lied, I suppose—instructed by their parents."

"As like as not," answered Miss Gimp. "But isn't it dreadful to think of? Who can wonder if they go to destruction?"

"Nobody. And so the child is gone?"

"Yes. No doubt they took it with them, this morning. But I'll find out all about it, by hook or by crook, see if I don't."

And with this assurance, the dressmaker, who had a good deal of work on hand, to be ready by a certain time, took her departure to renew her vain efforts at meeting her engagements. To promise was a part of her profession—and not to keep these promises to the letter, the other part. Having the interests of the whole neighbourhood to attend to, it was impossible to be entirely punctual in such unimportant matters.

## CHAPTER XX.

It was past midday when the carpenter and his wife returned from Clifton, each with sober but not troubled countenances. Their anxieties about the babe's welfare were fully satisfied; but they came back with the sad assurance that its sweet smile had faded from their home for ever—that an angel had departed from among them, and with it, they feared, the sweet, angelic influences that, in so brief a time, had made their desert to blossom as the rose.

A hurried dinner was prepared, and then Harding went to his shop, that had now been closed for nearly two whole days. It was his intention to go from there, immediately, to farmer Grant's to make arrangements about the new roof, which he had promised to attend to immediately. He was just on the eve of doing so when a neighbour stopped at the door, and said—

"Why, what's been the matter, Harding? I was about going over to your house, to see if you were sick or dead."

"I've had a little business to attend to, which has taken all my time for nearly two days," replied the carpenter; "but I'm through with it now, and at my post again."

"You've lost a job by it, I'm thinking," said the neighbour.

"How so?"

"I heard Grant abusing you right and left for not keeping an engagement, yesterday morning. He said you promised to come over and see him about a new roof to his barn; and that he waited in for you a greater part

of the day. He was dreadfully put out; and in the afternoon, rode over to Beechwood, and engaged a carpenter there."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Harding, as his countenance fell.

"Very sure. I saw him riding over, myself."

"I'm sorry. If he'd known *why* I was unable to keep my engagement, he would not have acted so hastily. I was, this moment, about going to see him."

"It won't be of any use, I can tell you. Why didn't you send him word that it was out of your power to see him?"

"I should have done so, but didn't think of it."

"And, what is more," said the neighbour, "Mr. Edgar was going to engage you to build an addition to his house; but Grant talked so strong about you—saying, among other things, that you were not to be depended upon—that he concluded to employ another carpenter. So you see, this 'little business' of yours has proved rather a bad business. But, good morning! I mustn't stop here."

The neighbour departed. As he turned his back, Harding folded his arms, and leaning hard against his workbench, gave way to feelings of despondency, not unmingled with reproaches toward Heaven for the hardness, even injustice, of these cruel reactions.

"I've done nothing to merit this," said he, in partial utterance of his true feelings. "Nothing! nothing! Then why am I left without work, though my hands are strong and my heart willing? God never hedges up a man's way in one direction without opening it in another—so says the schoolmaster—and so I began to think when Grant came with the offer of one job after I had lost another. But now the way that opened so encouragingly before me is closed, even before I had set my foot therein. I wonder in which direction it will now open?"

The bitterness of distrust was in both Harding's voice and countenance.

"There's no use in folding your arms and standing idle," said a voice, speaking within him.

"Of course, not. But what am I to do? There's not a single stroke of work on hand." The carpenter answered his own thought thus, speaking aloud.

"Do something—make something. There are lumber and tools in your shop."

As the inward voice said this, the eyes of Harding rested on a half-finished pine table, which he had commenced in an idle hour, and thrown aside for other work. It was suggested to him to complete the table rather than not do any thing. This suggestion he resisted for a time, because he had no heart to work, particularly as the work promised no return.

"Finish the table. Somebody will want it."

The voice spoke again. With something like blind obedience to this inward monitor, the carpenter commenced working on the table. The effort naturally relieved his mind from the heavy pressure under which it was bowed down. He felt better, but did not know why. He had yet to learn that in all useful work the mind rests with a degree of calmness; that there is a power in true mental or bodily labour, to sustain the spirit in doubt, pain, or sorrow. Once engaged in his task, he pursued it with a natural ardour, and, at the end of two hours, a well-made table stood finished in his shop. He was looking at it with a certain degree of pleasure, when Stark, who had been very shy of him for some weeks, presented himself at the shop-door.

"The very article I want," said the tavern-keeper, as his eyes fell on the table. "Is it to order, or on sale?"

"Three dollars of anybody's money will buy it," answered the carpenter.

"Enough said," returned Stark, drawing out his purse. "Here's the coin. I'll send my Tom over for it in half an hour. And, see here, Harding, if you've got time, I wish you'd make me two good, strong benches, about eight feet long. Some chaps got to skylarking over in my house last night, and smashed one all to pieces for me. How much will you charge for them?"

The carpenter took a piece of chalk, and figured up the cost of the wood.

"Two dollars apiece," said he.

"Very well. Make them. How soon will they be done?"

"As I've nothing particular on hand to-day, I'll get out the stuff this afternoon, and finish them some time early in the morning."

"That will do." And the tavern-keeper went his way, leaving three dollars in the carpenter's pocket, and his mind something easier. The stuff for the two benches was got out, and the work on both nearly completed by sundown, when Harding closed his shop and returned home. On his way, the gloomy, desponding state of mind returned. As he looked into the future, only a wall of darkness loomed up before him. His best customers had left him—the season was advanced—and no ground to build a hope upon was under his feet. Mrs. Harding saw the heavy contraction of his brows as he entered, and it caused a shadow to fall upon her heart. Had the evil spirit, which the presence of Grace drove out, come back to him again? Alas! alas! if it were so! Yes, the evil spirit had come back, but, as yet, its power over him was small. It lay in his breast as a live coal, and only waited for the fuel of excitement to kindle a blaze of destructive passion. Happily, that fuel was not supplied. There was nothing in his home to fret or disturb him. His wife spoke to him so kindly, that he could not but answer kindly, and the children were so

quiet among themselves, that no cause of annoyance or anger existed in that direction. Still, he remained gloomy, almost entirely silent.

"I don't know what is going to become of us, Mary," said he, as they sat together, after the children had gone to bed. The gentleness and kindness of his wife's manner had gradually subdued the state of irritability that threatened so much of evil; and now he felt like drawing nearer to her—letting her share his anxieties, and offer him her sympathy.

"Why do you say this, Jacob?" Mrs. Harding raised her eyes to the sober face of her husband.

"I haven't a stroke of work."

"How comes that?" The interrogation was so gently made, that it encouraged, instead of repressing confidence.

"Dear knows! I don't just understand it. To me, it seems very strange, that just now work should all stop, when there's not been a day before, in ten years, that I hadn't as much as I could do. I promised Mr. Grant to call yesterday morning about putting a new roof on his barn. But you know why I couldn't see him. He got angry because I didn't keep my appointment, and gave the job to a carpenter over in Beechwood."

"That's only a single job," said Mrs. Harding, without seeming to be in the least troubled by the gloomy prospect before them. "You're a good workman, that every one knows. And I've often heard you say, that a man who does good work, never need fear but what he'll have enough to do."

"Yes, Mary; but look how far the season is advanced. Every good job that I expected has gone into other hands, and I don't know a soul that now talks of building even a pig-pen this year. I feel completely disheartened. If we were only a little beforehand, I wouldn't feel so

bad. But we are not. Every thing is run down, and I haven't ten dollars ahead."

Just then some one knocked at the door. Harding opened it, and found a strange man, with a large bundle in his hand. His own name was inquired for.

"I am the person," he answered.

"Mrs. Beaufort sent this letter to you"—handing a letter—"and this bundle to Mrs. Harding"—reaching out the package.

"Won't you come in?" said the carpenter, as he received the letter and package.

"No, sir. It is late, and I must ride over to Clifton to-night."

The man departed, and Harding turned back into the house. Breaking the seal of the letter with unsteady hands, he opened it, and read—

"I wish to see you to-morrow. Come over early. If I am not mistaken, I can serve your worldly interests materially. I learn that you are a good workman, and faithful in the performance of whatever you may undertake. I am about putting up several outbuildings, and making some important alterations in my house. It is partly in reference to these matters that I wish to see you.

"EDITH BEAUFORT."

Within this letter, another, directed to Mrs. Harding, was enclosed.

"O Jacob! Just see here!" By the time her husband had gathered the meaning of his letter, Mrs. Harding was in full possession of the contents of hers. As she thus exclaimed, she held up two bank bills, each claiming the valuation of fifty dollars, while her face had a bright, joyful, wondering expression.

"Why, Mary!" ejaculated the bewildered carpenter, as he reached out for the letter of his wife. It read—



"Accept, dear madam, from one who can never forget, and never repay the debt she owes you, the enclosed as a first act of justice. Use it for yourself and children. Accept, also, a few small presents for yourself and them. I have talked much with my mother about you and your good husband since you left us this morning; and I think, if there is nothing to bind you to your present place of abode, that we shall soon have you near us. We are about making some extensive repairs, improvements, and alterations in and around our home, and my mother thinks that your husband is just the man to whom she can safely intrust their execution. She desires him to see her in the morning. Urge him to come without fail.

"Yours, with gratitude,

"EDITH PERCIVAL."

"It is broad daylight now." Such were the carpenter's words, after sitting silent for some moments.

"The darkest hour is just before daybreak, you know," said Mrs. Harding, her eyes filling with glad tears.

"Providence never hedges up a man's way in one direction, without opening it in another. So Mr. Long said to me; and so I tried to believe. But how can one believe with a mountain rising up in his path, and thick darkness on either side of him? I cannot."

"But let us not forget, Jacob"—Mrs. Harding's voice was subdued, almost humble—"what more the school-master said in his kind and earnest talks with us."

"What did he say, Mary?"

"That the hedging up of our way in life, and the opening of new paths, are not for the alone sake of worldly good."

"Yes, I remember." The carpenter bowed his head thoughtfully.

"But for the sake of heavenly and eternal good," continued Mrs. Harding. "How much he talked of our

mental wants, and of our mental sufferings! and as he talked, did we not both see and feel, that mere bodily wants and sufferings were nothing in comparison to these? The natural event of finding a babe at our door, which we received with reluctance, how much delight of mind it produced! Now, it was in providence, as Mr. Long said, that the babe was so left at our door; and does it not seem, that it was so provided for, in order that, through this natural event, our spirits might become better and happier? Surely, we are all better and happier for the presence of dear little Grace among us?"

"Have I not said so a hundred times, Mary?" There was light in the carpenter's face as he said this.

"And will we not all be better and happier, if we can be where our eyes, every little while, may look upon her angel face? Oh yes, I know we will, for the sight of that face will lift our hearts upward, and make us desire that spiritual innocence of which, as Mr. Long so beautifully said, she was the perfect bodily correspondent. And the desire will prompt us to resist the evils of our nature; and if we resist evil, you know, it is said that it will depart from us. Dear husband!"—and as Mrs. Harding, animated with her subject, leaned toward him, and laid her hand upon his arm, the carpenter saw, as of late he had seen so many times, the sweet beauty in her face that had charmed and won his love in the time gone by—"dear husband! let us believe that the hedging up of your way in the old direction, and the opening of it in this, is not so much for the sake of worldly prosperity as for the higher good of our spirits. Oh! is not peace of mind more to be desired than all earthly benefits? It is, Jacob; my heart—your heart—replies that it is. Let us, then, in accepting the earthly good, look still higher, and claim the better portion that may be ours."

"You are learning these wise lessons faster than I am, Mary," said the carpenter, with a tenderness of

manner that went to the heart of his wife. "In the school of good I shall be, I fear, a slow learner. But the apter scholar must have patience with my poor progress. I am hasty, moody, and passionate by nature, Mary, as you know too well. As you overcome, give me aid. If you can keep your heart in the sunlight, mine will not long remain under the cloud. If your sky continues serene, the storm will soon pass from mine. Try and remember this, Mary, and in my darker moods, bear with me. You will surely have your reward."

"And in my darker moods, Jacob," answered his wife—"and they will come—for I, too, am hasty and passionate: you must bear with me. Oh, let us help one another!"

The pledges and promises of that hour were never forgotten, as the brighter, happier future attested. On examining the package sent by the mother of Grace, it was found to contain various articles of clothing for Mrs. Harding and her children, besides a handsome vest pattern, and a dozen fine silk handkerchiefs for the carpenter. They were gratefully received, coming, as they did so timely, and under circumstances that did not make the gift a burdening obligation. Tranquil was their sleep that night, and the morning of a new day found them looking hopefully into the brightening future.

## CHAPTER XXI.

A MONTH later in the progress of events, and we find the carpenter and his family residing in a small, neat house, on the estate of Mrs. Beaufort, happily relieved from all anxiety about the "bread that perishes," and surrounded with more of taste and comfort than they had ever known. Harding had already entered, actively, upon the execution of such work as Mrs. Beaufort first desired, and, thus far, was giving every satisfaction. Why should this not be? for he was quick and skilful in all the branches of his trade, and perfectly honest in the execution of whatever might be intrusted to him. All that could be done to make Mrs. Harding's new home a pleasant one was done by Mrs. Percival, who came over, almost daily, to see her, accompanied by her babe, whose visits to the carpenter's family ever seemed like the shining in of sunbeams. Grace was still the angel of their household, beating back through her sweet presence to their bodily eyes, or, when absent, to the eyes of their spirits, the natural passions, which, like evil beasts, were striving to devour the innocent affections just born in their hearts, and which were daily gaining strength and beauty. Bright moments to Harding, in the day's circle of hours, were those in which the babe, borne in the arms of her nurse, came out to see him at his work. If he laid down his axe, his saw, or his plane at such times, that he might take the happy little one, and hold her against his heart, who could blame the act, or deem him an idler from his tasks? Not a stroke the less was given for these moments of self-indulgence—if we may call them by so cold a name—for they sent new

life through the carpenter's nerves, and fresh vigour to his willing hands.

Only a few weeks were permitted to pass ere the public announcement of Edith's marriage was made, accompanied by such evidence to all interested friends, as removed even the shadow of doubt or suspicion. The fact of the babe's abandonment by its mother at the door of a stranger, was never clearly understood. That it had been in the carpenter's family was known; but under what peculiar circumstances it came there, was a matter of question even to the neighbours of Harding. Beyond this narrow circle, it was taken for granted, that in order to conceal the marriage and birth of the child, Mrs. Harding had been selected as the nurse, and pledged to secrecy in regard to its parentage. Even among the carpenter's old neighbours, this theory finally prevailed, in consequence of its adoption by Miss Gimp.

"I always said"—so the dressmaker gossiped, after having settled to her own satisfaction all the difficulties presented by the case—"that Mrs. Harding knew a great deal more about the child than she cared to tell. I said this in the beginning, and I've never altered my mind. You can't make me believe that people like the Hardings would take a strange babe into their house, and treat it even better than one of their own, unless well paid for it. It isn't in nature, much less in the nature of such people."

And this solution of the matter was pretty generally adopted, thus saving the young mother that crushing odium which must have followed the clear annunciation of her act, even done as it was in a state of partial derangement.

Two months only had passed, since Edith was presented to her friends in her true character, when Colonel D'Arcy, not to be baffled in the pursuit of her hand, wrote her a long, earnest letter of sympathy and con-

fidence, begging forgiveness at the same time for the ardour of his attentions at a period when she must have been bowed to the earth with sorrow—a sorrow of which he was “necessarily ignorant”—and asking the privilege of occasionally visiting at her mother’s house as a friend. Not to leave the matter solely to her unbiassed decision, the gallant colonel wrote also to Mrs. Beaufort, mentioning his letter to her daughter; and frankly saying to her that, notwithstanding the secret marriage of Edith, and birth of a child, now that her husband was dead, he was ready again to offer his hand. Instantly, the smouldering ambition of this proud woman was fanned into a blaze; and, once more, she resolved to compass, if possible, the long-desired marriage of her daughter. The acknowledgment of Edith’s true relation—that of the widowed wife of an obscure, young adventurer—would, she had not doubted, at once settle all so far as D’Arcy was concerned; and this was why she strove so desperately to prevent its taking place. In consenting to publicity, she had abandoned her ambitious hopes. Now, they all started again into vigorous life. The hand of her daughter was yet deemed worthy of possession, even by Colonel D’Arcy; the marriage, so dear to her heart, might yet be accomplished; and she instantly resolved that its failure should not be in consequence of any want of effort on her part.

The two letters came by the same post. Edith had just finished reading hers, when Mrs. Beaufort, the ardour of whose reawakened purpose impelled to an immediate interview with her daughter, entered the room where she sat, with the flush of outraged womanhood yet warm upon her cheeks.

“Is your letter from Colonel D’Arcy?” inquired the mother, slightly hesitating, in the conscious conviction that the subject would be disagreeable.

“It is,” was Edith’s simple yet firm response.

"He knows of your marriage?"

"Yes."

"May I see your letter?"

Edith handed the letter to her mother, who, after reading it, said—

"What answer will you make?"

"None," was replied.

"None! That will be uncourteous."

"He is entitled to no courtesy from me," was the decisive answer, "and will get none."

"But, Edith"—Mrs. Beaufort's face was flushing, and her eyes beginning to glitter.

"Mother!"—Edith interrupted her—"what I have said to you, hitherto, about this man, was said from the heart; and I give it a repeated utterance, hardly repressing a cry of abhorrence. His very name is an offence; and his presence here, if you permit him to come, will be to me an outrage. I understand the hidden import of his glossing letter clearly; but he writes to me in vain. No—not even as a friend will I receive him. Mother!——"

A hurried step was heard this instant in the hall, and Edith, checking the utterance of what was on her tongue, started, with eager eyes and changing cheeks, to the floor. With hands raised and partly extended, and her gaze riveted on the entrance to the room, she stood, her ear bent to the sounding tread of a man's approaching feet. An instant more, and uttering wildly the cry—

"Henry! Oh, my husband! my husband!" she threw herself upon the breast of a tall, handsome, embrowned young man, who sprung forward to receive her, and catching her eagerly in his arms, covered her face with kisses.

"O Henry! am I dreaming?" sobbed the bewildered young creature, as, disengaging herself partly from his

arms, she gazed into his face, pressing the hair back with both hands from his ample forehead.

"Not dreaming, Edith, dear," he answered. "The dream is past—this is the glad awakening."

"My husband! My dear, dear husband!" And, fondly, Edith laid her head upon his bosom. A moment only it rested there; then, starting up, she caught him by the arm, and, drawing him toward a door that opened into an adjoining room, said—

"Come."

He followed, as she led.

"Look!"

They had entered, and were beside a cradle in which their babe was sleeping.

"It is ours, Henry!—our sweet, precious one!—our darling Grace!" And lifting it tenderly, she laid it in his arms.

As if a blasting spectre had met her vision, Mrs. Beaufort fled to her chamber at the sight of Percival, and was now hidden from all eyes but those of her Maker. She had fully believed him dead, and had rejoiced in his death; his sudden appearance, therefore, was as of one risen from the dead. His coming, too, just as old schemes, so long cherished, were about being reconstructed, to scatter all her mad ambition to the wind, seemed so like Heaven's mockery, that, with a crushed, helpless feeling, she shrunk into herself, and bowed her spirit in the bitterness of forced submission.

Two hours afterward—Edith, who knew her too well to intrude during the time, had not even tapped at her chamber-door—she came forth, and received the husband of her daughter with a degree of cordiality altogether unexpected.

"We believed you dead, Mr. Percival," said she. "Can you explain why we were deceived by false intelligence? Mr. Maris wrote to us, first, that you were very



ill, and soon after, that you had died of a malignant southern fever."

"I was ill, very ill, for a time," the young man answered, "but not of a malignant southern fever. The physician at the hospital to which I was sent to die, and where, in providence, I was permitted to recover, strongly suspected that I had been unfairly dealt by—some of my symptoms resembling in a marked degree the effects of poison."

"Poison!" Mrs. Beaufort looked startled as she gave almost involuntary utterance to the word.

"Yes; and I have now but little doubt that such was the case; for I learn, with no small surprise, that after my reported death, Colonel D'Arcy renewed his offers for the hand of Edith."

"Colonel D'Arcy! What of him? What had he to do with your sickness?" Mrs. Beaufort's countenance became suddenly clouded.

"I know not that he had any thing to do with it," replied Percival; "but this I know, he was a friend of Mr. Maris, and visited him on the night I was taken sick. They drank wine together, and both urged me with such gracious kindness to take a glass of sherry with them, that I could not refuse. Colonel D'Arcy touched his glass to mine, and said, in a singularly altered voice, so it struck me at the moment—

"Your good health, Mr. Percival."

"I did not like the man, for out of his eyes an evil spirit had ever looked at me. On this particular occasion, that spirit seemed to glare upon me with a kind of malignant triumph. Soon after drinking the wine, I felt an unusual heat in my stomach, which gradually pervaded my system. My head grew heavy and painful, and my body hot and sluggish. On complaining of indisposition, Mr. Maris advised me to go home, saying that a few hours' rest would restore me. But so far

from that, I was in a raging fever all night, and early on the next morning, at his suggestion, as I afterward learned of Mr. Maris, I was sent to the hospital to die. An ordinary fever would have run to its crisis, terminating in favour of or against the patient, in a certain number of days; but the fever which had seized upon me was altogether different, and seemed as if it would never tire drinking at my vitals. When, at last, its fire abated, I was left so much exhausted, that small hope of recovery was felt by either physician or attendants. It was more than two months before strength sufficient to bear the weight of my body was gained. Then the life-current began to flow more freely; and a few weeks of rapid convalescence placed me so near to health, that I ventured to make this homeward journey. Soon after I was taken to the hospital, a man named Henry Percival died in one of the sick wards. Mr. Maris, I suppose, took it for granted that my death was the one reported, and immediately communicated the fact to you."

For a considerable time after the young man ceased speaking, Mrs. Beaufort sat with her eyes upon the floor, evidently in deep and troubled thought.

"There's a dark mystery here," she said, at length, speaking partly to herself. "Mr. Maris, then, is a particular friend of Colonel D'Arcy?" she added, raising her eyes.

"They appeared to be very intimate. I often saw them together."

"It's a strange story." She again seemed speaking to herself. "And I can't make it all out. Colonel D'Arcy?—Mr. Maris?—poison?"

As Percival looked at her fixedly, he saw a low shudder pass through her frame. A dark suspicion entered his mind on the instant, but he resolutely thrust it out; and, in doing so, he was but just to Mrs. Beaufort. If he had

been dealt by foully, of which there was small reason to doubt, she was no party to the wicked deed.

A few days afterward, Colonel D'Arcy, following up his letters with a degree of confident assurance, made a visit to Clifton, in order to throw the weight of his personal influence in the scale, and thus secure a preponderance in his favour.

Mrs. Beaufort, now that all blinding antagonism toward Percival was laid aside, and closer contact gave her a better view of his character and a clearer appreciation of his worth, began to find herself drawn toward him with a power of attraction, at first resisted, but hourly gaining strength. His intelligence was of a different order from that by whose glitter she had been attracted through life. It was not the obtrusive intelligence which is assumed for effect—illustrating only the pride of its possessor—but had in it a soul of moral wisdom—a beautiful humanity, warm with a higher life. Often, as he talked, she listened with something akin to wonder; and, as her eyes rested upon his animated countenance, she saw in it a manly beauty, caught from the inspiring soul, that compelled a half-reluctant admiration. Not unfrequently, at these times, would the face of Colonel D'Arcy present itself before the eyes of her mind with singular vividness, yet ever marred by an expression, well remembered as peculiarly its own, but now, as seen in contrast with the fine countenance of Percival, *felt* to be cruel, selfish, and debasingly sensual. Almost with a shudder, at such times, would she close her bodily eyes, seeking to destroy the unpleasant vision. It was on an occasion like this that the servant announced Colonel D'Arcy.

“Impossible!” exclaimed Mrs. Beaufort, thrown entirely from her guard.

The name was repeated.

“Tell him that I will be down in a few minutes,” she said, recovering herself.

For some moments the three looked at each other in doubt and irresolution. All of them knew well the object of his visit. Percival was the first to speak.

"Let us," said he, "go down together and receive him. He thinks I am dead, if he thinks of me at all. Should my suspicions be true, at sight of me he will be thrown from his guard and betray himself. Come! Let us go at once."

And he arose, moving on a pace or two in the direction of the door. Mrs. Beaufort and Edith followed, as if impelled by his will—the latter carrying Grace in her arms.

Side by side they entered the parlour where D'Arcy sat awaiting some member of the family.

"Colonel D'Arcy!"

Mrs. Beaufort inclined her body gracefully, and smiled upon her visitor with a bland smile. But he saw not the motion nor the smile, for his eyes were riveted instantly on the calm face of Percival, who, with his young wife shrinking to his side and holding her babe against her bosom, looked at him steadily and sternly. Only for a moment did he stand in the attitude of astonishment assumed as the unexpected apparition confronted him—then, with a look of dismay and a exclamation of terror, he swept past the little group and fled from the house.

"I did not err in my suspicions," said Percival, speaking with entire self-possession. "He is guilty of having sought my life. Dear Edith!" he added, as he drew an arm around her, and pressed his lips to her pure forehead—"how thankful am I for your dear sake that his wicked purpose failed."

"My children!"

The arms of Mrs. Beaufort were flung suddenly around them both.

"My children!"

Her voice choked, and what she would have said further,

remained unspoken. Pride could not suffer her to betray the strong agitation she felt.

There were a few moments of silence. Then she disengaged her arms, and turning from them, retired with slow and stately steps to her own apartments.

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One scene more, briefly sketched, and the curtain must fall upon our characters.

A few months have glided pleasantly by. The nearer view that Mrs. Beaufort now had of the son-in-law accepted with such an intense reluctance, enabled her to see the higher qualities of mind with which he was endowed; as well as the sterling virtues already developed in one so young. Her estates were large, and needed the intelligent care of a man who had some acquaintance with legal and landed affairs. This knowledge, the education of Percival had in a measure supplied; and his calm judgment and integrity of purpose were a guarantee for the rest that Mrs. Beaufort was very ready to accept: and the result involved no measure of disappointment.

So well pleased was she with our friend the carpenter, that she soon made a contract with him to remain as overseer on her estate, at a liberal salary.

It was a warm afternoon near the close of the ensuing May, that Mrs. Percival stepped across the broad green lawn that sloped gently from her mother's fine old mansion, and took her way to the pleasant cottage-home of the carpenter and his family, that stood only at a short distance. On entering, she found no one in the sitting-room; but, with the familiarity of a friend who knows the awaiting welcome at all times, she pushed open the door of the adjoining apartment, when a sight met her

eyes that made the blood leap warmer from her heart. A week before, had been born in that chamber, another babe ; and it was to see the mother and inquire after her wants, if any were unsupplied, that Mrs. Percival had now come. She supposed that Harding was absent at work ; but this was not so. The fact was, scarcely an hour passed during each day, since the little stranger came, that he did not run in to look at its fair young face, or take it in his great, strong arms, and bear it about the room. He was sitting now near the bed, where lay his happy wife, with her face turned toward him and the babe ; and he was holding the tender little one on his arm, and gazing with a look that could not be mistaken for love, down upon the sweet image of innocence. Around were grouped the children, and little Lotty, standing between her father's knees, was laying her white finger softly on the baby's cheek, and talking to it fondly.

As Mrs. Percival swung open the door, and at a glance comprehended the scene, she said, with a pleasant familiarity that her previous intercourse with them warranted—

"Ah ! nursing that baby again, Mr. Harding ? Why, one would think you'd never had a baby in your house before !"

"We never knew the value of a baby," replied the carpenter, "until yours came to us and won our hearts. Ah ! She was the Angel of our Household, and it was a hard trial to see her go forth never to return again. But God has given us another angel."

"And may she be dearer to you than the one you have lost," said Mrs. Percival, as she reached over and took the precious burden from the arms of Mr. Harding. "Have you chosen a name for it yet ?"

Mrs. Harding glanced toward her husband.

"It was chosen the hour of her birth," answered the carpenter.

"Is it Grace?"

Mrs. Percival smiled as she made the inquiry.

"No other name would express our love for her. Yes, it is Grace!"

"May she indeed prove, as I am sure she will, the Angel of your Household," said Mrs. Percival, with touching solemnity.

An audible "Amen" broke the stillness that followed; and, as we repeat the word, the curtain falls.

THE END.











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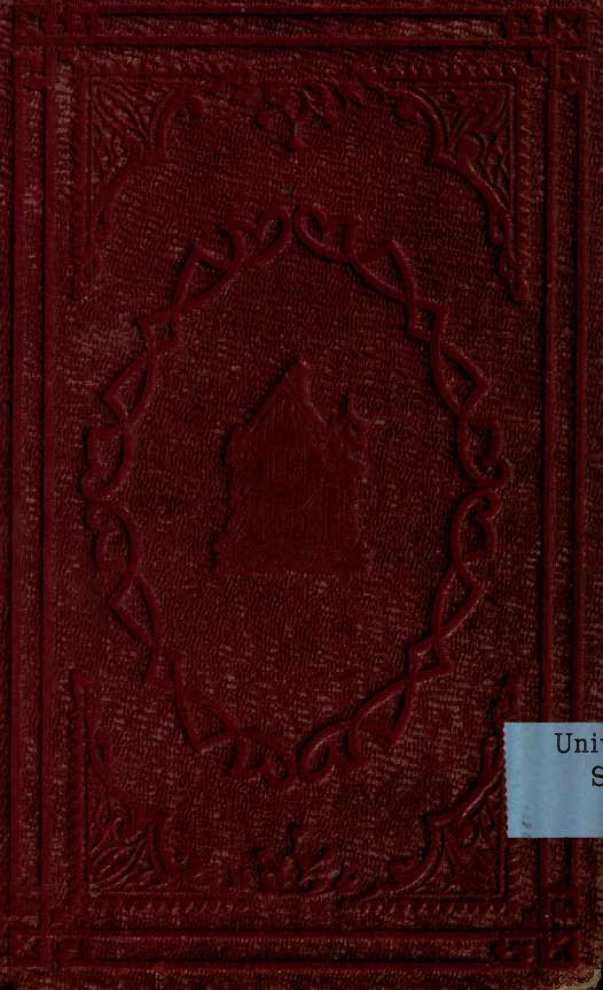
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